



CITY OF SIN

BOOK 02

Misty South

EPUB CREATION BY LISA HAYES

City of Sin

(罪恶之城)

by

Misty Rain of Jiangnan

(烟雨江南)

Synopsis

Every drop of this family bloodline is stained with sin. They are the embodiment of contradiction; calm yet maniacal, with great memories yet often forgetful. They pledge themselves to their dreams yet often compromise, are angels that are also devils... It's why I hate them. And also love them.

The only hope of his family, a youth with the blood of elves and devils walks on a battleground of annihilation and rebirth. He wills his way through boiling lava and icy depths, killing on this field of despair to strike down the lofty figure in his sight. One day he'll grasp his blade tightly and survey his surroundings, only to find no more enemies to kill.

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English Translation by ying, Theo, OMA @ [Wuxiaworld](#)

ePub conversion by Lisa Hayes @ [Hasseno Blog](#)

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Book 2, Chapter 1 - A Mishap

The feeling of passing through a planar portal was about the same as any other. One's consciousness blanked for a brief moment, before glitching back into existence. It felt longer than usual, though, but then again they'd crossed an immeasurable distance in a mere few seconds.

Archeron men were waiting at the other side, having built a reconnaissance base and set up a Lighthouse of Time to guide those who came afterwards. In the vast and chaotic currents of time and space, the Lighthouse of Time would provide a stable position to lock on to, preventing the traveller from losing their way to a deviation in the teleportation route that was set up on short notice.

According to the information Richard had acquired, the base wasn't particularly large. Even including the natives they'd subjugated there weren't more than fifty people present, and the place was barely larger than an adventuring party's camp. Seventeen of the Archérons sent out in the original party had survived, having explored less than fifty kilometres out. It could be said that they were still rather clueless about the plane's situation.

However, the coordinates of every stable plane were extremely precious. Once the plane was completely conquered, it would result in a large fortune and innumerable resources. Gatón only had one unconquered lesser plane himself, so Richard didn't exactly have a choice.

Richard was already quite satisfied with lodging at a relatively safe vase, with men who'd arrived beforehand and were already familiar with the environment. Many of the initial dangers involved in planar travel had already been avoided.

A burst of dazzling white light appeared in Richard's sight. It blinded and hurt him, taking away the colourful lights that had pervaded his vision upto that point. There were no dazzling lights

when he regained vision, however; he instead saw a cloudy sky, with trees and mountains around. A gentle breeze blew past his face, telling Richard that a whole new world had opened up ahead of him.

Outside of the purple flora, everything present looked quite the same as Norland. It was unknown whether it was due to a particular season or it was normal all year round, but the mountain range that stretched endlessly under the azure sky was covered in various shades of purple that exuded vitality.

However, there was barely any time for Richard to admire the scenery of the plane. A strong sense of danger suddenly welled up in his heart, and the sharp whistle of the wind suddenly rang in his ears. A cry rang out, and from the corner of his eye Richard saw Waterflower charging towards him.

Waterflower pinned Richard to the ground, and an arrow whizzed past them right after to bury itself right next to his cheek. The strong winds hurt his eyes, the arrow still making a disturbing hum as it vibrated in the earth.

Although this was a close shave with death, Richard was a lot calmer this time. Enemy attack! That was the first thing that came to his mind.

“Follow me!” Waterflower said stiffly. She leapt up like a cheetah, her figure constantly switching between paths. She took a winding path as she charged towards a tree not far away. Richard flipped onto his feet as well, swiftly running alongside her.

A novice knight was running as well, not far from them. However, he'd barely taken a few steps before some arrows whizzed by and pinned him down. A sharp whistle rang in the air as a hatchet flew over, burying itself into his back. The knight shouted in agony before collapsing to the ground.

It was only then that Richard managed to distinguish between the various sounds he heard in his ear. Murderous screams echoed

from every direction, making it clear that they had been surrounded. Incessant howls of agony rang out from the jungle, many of them from voices he was familiar with. The ones he didn't recognise sounded foreign and strange; they had to be from the enemies.

Richard rapidly took note of his surroundings. This was a sparse forest, a mixture of various trees and shrubs. There was only the occasional bulky tree that seemed old, with agile soldiers running amongst them. They took cover behind the trees and bushes, inching closer to their location.

Just from their movements Richard could tell that all of these enemies were level 5 or higher. They were familiar with battle in the woods, with a large number of archers amongst them. The only good news was that there were no signs of magic yet.

As he was looking at all this, Richard jumped towards the large tree that Waterflower had found. Once he was under cover, the young lady leapt forward like a wolf, charging towards the approaching enemies in the depths of the jungle with extraordinary agility. He was quite confident in her ability to deal with multiple lower-level opponents in a forest environment.

Surely enough, endless shrieks soon echoed around the area. Waterflower was like a true wolf hiding in the woods, pouncing from fallen enemy to enemy.

Richard composed himself, quickly buffing himself with a magical shield and stone skin. He then began to make his own way towards the most intense part of the battle.

He heard Gangdor snarl right ahead of him, following which the huge figure charged through two trees that were bound closely together. The hanging vines didn't hinder the brute in the least, falling to the ground one after the other as if they were cut off by sharp blades. With more than half of his upper body already bared, the long arrow stuck into his back was quite noticeable.

However, all of Gangdor's body was radiating with vengeance. It was evident that the arrow wouldn't affect his might in battle, as he wielded an unknown's tree trunk that was even thicker than his arm. The trunk was coloured a sticky red and white, blood and brain matter all over it.

There were unsettling movements in the shadows surrounding them. The enemies were cautiously closing in on them, but neither that nor the injuries seemed to affect the part giant's fighting spirit. On the contrary, it only made him more ferocious. He took large strides forward, brandishing the large trunk in his hand. His heavy footsteps shook the ground relentlessly, while his snarls reverberated in the jungle, "You lowly creatures! Get yourselves out here and face your deaths! Don't think these toothpicks of trees will save you, I can smell your stink from kilometres away! Look at this axe in my..."

Gangdor's voice came to a halt. He looked at the tree trunk in his hand, unsure as to how he should continue. All their weapons were transported together in a chest when they teleported, cutting down on the mana required to run the formation. His axe wasn't in his hand right now, instead packed tightly into the chest.

However, it was evident that the slaughter was more important than his warcry. Gangdor only paused for a moment, before continuing with his roar, "No weapon in my hand can handle the hunger! Shudder, you lowly creatures!"

Whoosh! The response Gangdor got was an arrow, shot forth towards him from behind. However, he displayed an agility not befitting of his build. In a flash he'd leapt to the side, easily dodging it. The trunk in his hands flew out into the jungle, ruthlessly smashing into a half-exposed archer.

The cracking of bones rang out, and the archer's body instantly distorted. The man couldn't even manage a groan before collapsing. Gangdor looked around for another weapon, but not finding anything he resorted to tearing down a nearby tree and

holding it in his hand.

The commotion of battle suddenly grew intense in another direction. Four knights tightly encircled Flowsand to protect her, continuing to retreat. They weren't armed well, with only one of them having a shield in hand while the others had to make do with longswords and axes. Sharp arrows rained down on them from the jungle, leaving all of the knights injured. However, their bodies were all shining with a faint radiance. Every time the tip of an arrow touched this glow, it came to a halt like it had fallen into water. The force of the arrows was halved at minimum.

Range Shield was a spell common to clerics and mages, one of the most practical of the elementary spellbook. Even in an unfavourable situation Flowsand appeared calm and collected. Although she was on the move as well, she was casting spells cleanly on the knights, one by one. The spells replenished their shields, and healed those who'd suffered more serious injuries. Although she was casting elementary spells, they were shot out one after the other. It was like she had inexhaustible power.

A burst of laughter suddenly echoed from the woods opposite Flowsand, sounding like grinding metal. A voice rang out, saying the same thing again and again. The cleric immediately cast a language proficiency spell, hearing what the other party had to say:

“Foreign invaders, you’ve landed in the hands of Sir Kojo. Don’t even think of putting up a struggle! I’ll kill all of you, and hang your bodies in front of the baron’s castle to show everyone in the lands how invaders end up! Hahahahaha!”

Book 2, Chapter 2-A Mishap(2)

A soldier who was fully covered in glistening silver armour emerged from the shrubs to the tune of booming laughter. He took wide steps, followed by dozens of others who rushed forth in order. They divided themselves evenly, flanking Flowsand and her knights in an arc.

However, a burning fireball suddenly shot out from the forest, heading for the soldiers furthest away. This ‘Sir Kojo’ exclaimed in shock, “Damn it, they have a mage! Defensive mode, now!”

With the spell being launched from so close, it was definitely too late to make any adjustments to their formation. Running wildly would only make them active targets for the opponents. Thus, they could only make use of the time between the mage’s spells to adjust their positions, deciding whether to retreat or advance.

Crouching behind one’s shield was an effective way to withstand fireballs. Those without could only pray for luck. Kojo kneeled at once, his body hunching as he buried his sword into the ground in front of him. The wide blade and his arm served to cover most of his vital parts, as he gathered energy for a defensive layer around himself.

However, a second fireball shot out from the depths of the forest before the first had even landed in place! The knight’s hands trembled at once— there was another mage! There was just a second between the fireballs, two mages had to be casting them around the same time.

There wasn’t much time for him to think, with the first fireball already having exploded loudly. Blazing waves of heat surged through the area, engulfing him and nearly half of his troop.

Kojo heard a chilling voice sound from amidst the ringing of the explosions, “I really must thank you, Sir Kojo. If I didn’t know your position, I would not be able to determine your power.” The

opponent was talking in common tongue, but his pacing was monotonous and his tone completely flat. This was a typical language comprehension spell. Indeed, they were invaders from a foreign plane!

Kojo roared in fury, but two more fireballs were shot out of the jungle at the same time. All four were placed in a square around Kojo, with him at the centre of the converging blasts. Such control was extremely good: the earliest fireball had landed the farthest, while the last was closer.

In a mere two breaths of time, the entire area was set ablaze. The soldiers who were originally the farthest and fastest to set off rushed out of the fire, but even they were burned by the enchanted flames. They rolled on the ground, leaking long howls.

As for those near the centre, there were no signs of struggle from them.

Right at the centre of it all, Kojo bitterly endured all the heat waves engulfing him one after the other. Four surges of heat assaulted him less than a second apart, depleting almost all of his energy.

When the final blast passed him, the knight disregarded the excruciating pain of his burns and struggled onto his feet. Just as he raised his head, he saw Richard taking large strides towards him, sprinting with another fireball conjured in his hand. He moved close until he was less than twenty metres away.

“You wretched lunatic! Curse you!” Kojo was so alarmed that his hairs were almost all standing. He no longer had time to consider how many mages there were exactly in the jungle. This was the first time one was charging towards him directly in the battlefield, and this one had a lethal spell in hand!

Richard slightly shoved his hand forward, causing an unavoidable fireball to zoom over towards the knight. Kojo let out a bellow of rage, drawing on his energy once more as he raised his

enormous sword up high, bringing it down in a flash to strike the spell coming towards him.

The fireball exploded, the force of the impact flinging him up in the air. The energy radiating from his armour flickered a few times, before eventually dying out completely. Attacking a fireball directly only slightly decreased the damage it could do, unless they had enchantments or were using enough energy to weaken the magic. Warriors still had to rely on their armour and shields to withstand the heat waves.

Kojo fell heavily to the floor, his helmet falling off to reveal a face that was already burned black and red. His lush beard and hair had long turned to cinders in the high temperature.

Despite his skill in battle techniques, the knight hadn't been able to withstand Richard's five consecutive fireballs. The only reason he was still alive now was because of his excellent energy reserves, which was in part due to his superior armour.

He struggled his way up once again. He glared at Richard like a wounded lion, only his left eye open as his right bled profusely. He barely managed to steady himself, saying with a sardonic smile, "Insignificant bastards from a foreign plane, don't get too ahead of yourselves! You'll all die very soon, alright!"

Richard lifted his hand, making a slash in the air as he said coldly, "You'll be first."

Kojo seemed like he wanted to say something else, but Waterflower's graceful figure had already appeared from the woods in a flash. Her movements were quick yet soundless, the 45-degree angle her body made with the ground making her look like a ghastly bolt of lightning. She moved behind Kojo at once, the Shepherd of Eternal Rest flashing in her hand.

Kojo's head suddenly flew up high, forming an arc of blood in the sky. However, his body stood up straight as before, refusing to collapse even as blood spurted from the neck.

Waterflower herself staggered for a moment upon performing the blow. That stunning move earlier had used up more than half of her own power. Just as she began to recover a bit, she heard Richard's sudden roar, "GET BEHIND COVER!"

Years living on the edge had given her the experience to leap instantly. She flipped a few times, making her way behind a large tree quite quickly. Two short spears whizzed by, burying themselves into the ground that she'd been standing upon but a moment ago.

"There are still enemies here! Kill them all!" Richard roared loudly, choosing to charge forward instead of retreat. He forged ahead, taking large strides towards the soldiers emerging from the jungle. As he advanced, he had already begun to chant his spells. When he brushed past Flowsand, Richard pointed his right hand to the front. An intense pulse of magic ran through the area, before four brutal boars were spawned in the forest, charging towards Kojo's soldiers ferociously.

The four creatures weighed more than a hundred kilos each, but they sprinted wildly, with frightening energy. They had long fangs and sharp bones on the back, all deadly weapons. Their hooves, harder than rock, caused the earth to rumble like thunder as they charged across the forest.

Even Kojo, were he still around, would have to take these boars seriously. With the remaining soldiers being around level five or six, they couldn't even take them on one-on-one. When they collided with the boars, they suddenly discovered that these magical creatures were more difficult to deal with than they had expected. All of the brutal boars were sparkling, covered by a faint divine radiance. They'd completely transformed into a whole new level of threat after a blessing had been cast on them.

Flowsand remained silent, having cast the blessing with a mere wave of her hands. She hadn't chanted any spells aloud from the start. It seemed like all of her spells could be cast silently, and her

reserves seemed endless.

As Richard saw the four brutal boars disrupt the enemy's line of battle, he finally let out a breath. Everything in front of him went black at once, causing him to nearly fall. A warm, soft, yet strong body supported his weight. Soon after, an icy streak of spiritual power was instilled in his body, letting his drained mana recover faster.

Grade 3 spell, Vitality. It had come just in time.

Book 2, Chapter 3 - A Mishap (3)

The four knights originally guarding Flowsand had already dispersed to the sides, ready to face their enemies who'd freed themselves from the boars head on. Now, the only person left supporting Richard was Flowsand.

Before Richard even had the time to express his gratitude, three warriors were charging them down. With the knights tangled up, they likely realised that it was best to dash towards the mages in a straight line. Unable to break away from the enemies that outnumbered them, Richard's knights were helpless as the warriors pounced towards him.

Richard quietly tried to gather some mana, but gave up quite quickly. He didn't have enough to power even a single fireball, but the warriors were so close that he could see the flames burning in their sinister gazes. His face flushed a peculiar shade of scarlet on this line between life and death, and strands of hair flew back as he leaped forward to dash right between one of the warriors.

Bang! The collision was loud and powerful, taking the warrior by surprise. He stumbled backwards immediately, spouting fresh red blood all over his opponent. With Eruption having been activated, Richard was currently no weaker than a level 10 warrior. The level 5 opponent was seriously injured in just the one frontal collision.

Richard himself already took advantage of the moment to remove the axe the man had in his hands. The amber second moon suddenly flashed out above his head, moonforce flowing into his body at an astonishing speed. He placed the axe level with his body, spinning on the spot to leave a ring of yellow sweeping past the remaining warriors.

Silvermoon secret sword, Ring of Destiny.

The two aggressors were still charging at full speed, and nothing seemed to be out of place for the first few steps they took.

However, just as the edges of their swords approached Flowsand, they staggered, unable to stand steadily as they split in twain. The amber ring of light had been powerful enough to separate arms from their bodies, leaving unbelievably deep wounds on their lower torsos.

Shocked out of their wits, the two warriors howled loudly as they pressed on the wounds with all their might. Blood and innards spilled out wildly, however, not enough for the single remaining hands to stop. The violent struggles only made it worse, blood spurting out like a fountain as the cries quickly grew faint. Even that quickly faded away.

The amber moon disappeared silently, the axe in Richard's hand spotless and free of any trace of blood. He rested the head of the axe on the ground, staring calmly at the enemies who were standing mere metres away. Even though the warriors had an absolute advantage in numbers, none of them dared to take a single step forward.

Richard glanced at the axe in his hands, noting with a beautiful but cruel smile, "This seems to be a little too sharp."

Colour immediately drained from the volunteers' faces, and they retreated by instinct. Even veteran warriors would grow fearful when faced with a homicidal maniac who found joy in torture and blood.

However, explosive claps rang out from the forest behind them. The woods were instantly engulfed in smoke and dust, with trees collapsing continuously. It was so much more chaotic than the encounter with the boars, almost as if some gigantic beast were charging through.

All of a sudden, two archers flew out of the woods, crashing heavily onto the floors. Their bodies lay there, unmoving and at weird angles. It was obvious that they hadn't come out willingly.

The shrubbery surrounding them collapsed, a loud explosion

sounding as two trolls rushed out of the dust with a thunderous snarl. Each one had a thick tree trunk on hand, with no regard for the class of opponent they were facing as they smashed heads in without exception. Absorbed in the chase, they even knocked nearby trees aside, roots and all. The arrows raining down on them were ineffective as well; the archers had no vision. More than half of the trolls' bodies were covered by branches and leaves.

Both trolls had several arrows stuck in their bodies, but their naturally tough skin and thick fat made for armour of its own. The arrows were like mere toothpicks, not hindering their movements at all.

They did not observe the surroundings, nor did they have any concept of teamwork. All they did was to dash directly into the frontlines of the remaining troops, sending two or three warriors flying with every wave of the trunks in their hands. One of the Archeron knights would have been sent flying as well, had he not ducked away in time. Tiramisu didn't even look like a mage, wielding his trunk with the same ferocity that Medium Rare did.

Gangdor rushed over as well, roaring his way into battle. His body was covered with flesh wounds, but looking at the blood on the trunk in his hand his opponents must have been corpses by now. Waterflower bounded over behind his enormous frame, making no sounds regardless of whether she stepped on solid ground or twigs. The Shepherd of Eternal Rest was resting diagonally in her hand, not stained by a single drop of blood even though it had obviously seen its fair share.

Completely surrounded, the last dozen or so warriors were cut down in a flash, leaving only a handful of critically injured survivors.

Richard seemed to remain unfazed, standing straight with the axe still on the ground. The smile in his face hadn't faded in the least as Flowsand walked over stealthily, patting him on the back and whispering, "Hey. There's no enemies left!"

To her utter surprise, Richard went weak at her slightest touch. She held her hands out to catch him in a hurry, but couldn't prop his heavy body up for long. Just as she was about to collapse under his weight, a white shadow flashed past her. Before she knew it, Waterflower was already on the right, helping her support Richard.

Having overdrafted his mana, using Eruption and forcefully executing a secret sword left Richard completely spent. He'd been near-unconscious by the last sentence, barely holding up his intimidation on the strength of will alone.

Flowsand and Waterflower laid Richard flat on the ground. The cleric raised her hand, about to cast a vitality spell on Richard, but the boy caught her arm. Seeing her startled expression, he responded weakly, "There's many injured. I'll be fine after some rest, don't waste your power on me."

Flowsand cast a meaningful glance at Richard, standing up without protest and walking towards the injured. She cast minor healing on everyone, ensuring that outside of severe injuries everyone would heal in three days at most. Resting in Waterflower's arms, however, Richard started to gasp more violently. The mana depletion this time was a lot more unbearable than he had expected. All he wanted to do was to close his eyes, but he knew that at such a time he could not afford to lose consciousness lest his mana pool be damaged. He struggled to ask, "Is there anything that can keep me awake?"

"Alcohol!" Tiramisu chimed.

"Some very strong alcohol!" Medium Rare emphasised.

Both trolls then turned to face Gangdor, staring straight at him. The brute eyed the two trolls suspiciously before rummaging through his fabric belt, finally finding a small silver bottle that he passed to Waterflower.

A strong alcoholic smell hit everyone as she unscrewed the

bottle. Waterflower took a deep sniff, even tasting the drink with her tongue before she eventually let Richard take a big gulp.

Gangdor immediately yelled angrily, “Hey, that’s uncalled for! That’s a drink I made for myself! Do you really think I’d poison myself?”

“Hard to say,” Waterflower replied harshly, glaring coldly at Gangdor.

“WATERFLOWER!” Gangdor roared, grasping the trunk in his hand tightly. However, Waterflower stared at him with a poker face. Her fair, slender right hand was placed right on the Shepherd of Eternal Rest by her side. Gangdor’s expression fell as his gaze darted between the trunk in his hand and the sword in hers. At last, he shouted begrudgingly, “Don’t you dare use that sword!”

Waterflower just stared at Gangdor pitifully, almost like she was looking at an idiot.

Book 2, Chapter 4 - Annihilation

Richard downed half the bottle of alcohol, and some warmth began to radiate from his stomach. He felt better quickly, struggling to stand, “Knock it off! Where’s Olar?”

“I heard his voice coming from that direction,” Gangdor replied immediately, “I’ll look for him.” He then headed deep into the forest in a bid to avoid the awkward situation.

Richard shook his head with a wry smile, ordering the soldiers who could still stand to scour the battlefield. The trolls were put on sentry duty, to ensure that there were no more enemies hiding in the woods. Their naturally keen sense of smell would help sniff any out.

Of course, any enemies present should only be stragglers. Over fifty warriors had died trying to kill Richard’s party, and that had to be around the limit of what a mere knight could command. The knight’s strength had already caused Richard some shock.

Flowsand had finished with the treatments at that point, returning to Richard’s side. Her face was somewhat pale, but Richard looked at her intently before saying, “You seem to have an endless supply of holy spells.”

Flowsand looked at Richard, asking him in an indifferent manner befitting of her class, “I saw someone summon four brutal boars just earlier. Which powerful god of magic gave you the gift to summon a full four boars?”

A grade 4 summoning spell could only bring forth one or two boars. Even with enhancement, the spell would normally be limited to three. Without any special additions, even a great mage would not be able to summon four boars with a grade 4 spell.

Richard snickered, not continuing the conversation with this cleric that seemed not to run out of mana.

They soon had proper information on the state of the battlefield. A total of 69 enemies had died, including Kojo, with ten heavily injured and just two unscathed. This was over 70 elites, far surpassing the forces a Norland knight could command. Some of the poorer barons only had that many warriors under them...

Gangdor found Olar after some time, unconscious in the forest with two arrows stuck in his body. Fortunately, Flowsand used the last dregs of power she had to cast a greater heal on him, preserving his life.

Three of the ten soldiers who'd come with Richard had died, while two more were heavily injured. However, they managed to find the supplies they'd sent through the portal, with two crates of armour, one of weapons, and one with ingredients. Richard immediately had the survivors arm themselves.

Questioning the captives proved difficult. Be it the heavily injured ones or the two without much damage, not a word came out of their mouths. Thankfully, some information could be made out through their curses. For example, one of their gods had decreed the arrival of invaders. Kojo was the knight in charge of the reconnaissance party, and the one to follow right after would be a baron.

This meant that their encounter with the soldiers was premeditated, which is why they went under attack the moment they made it through. Their entire group was scattered, with each of them left to fend for themselves. If not for their individual power, they would have been annihilated on the spot.

Richard's mind grew clouded, and he looked at Flowsand. Her brows were furrowed—this plane had gods, and their enemies had strong faith. This was definitely not good news to a priestess, or for that matter to Richard. It meant he would need to spend more effort gathering information. However, there was something else which required his attention immediately.

“Where is the base that we will be setting up in?” Richard asked. The receiving end of the portal was supposed to have a base set up, but they’d appeared in a forest instead.

One of the soldiers Richard had sent out to scout returned soon, “Lord Richard, I’ve found the base. But... there isn’t a single person there!”

The base was just a kilometre away, and the foot soldier couldn’t seem to explain himself well, so Richard eventually decided to go there personally to have a look. If there was something that he did not understand, Flowsand would most likely know it herself.

However, when they found the base, even the indifferent Flowsand was somewhat stupefied.

The base was the size of a small village, the only difference being a layer of tall, strong walls surrounding it with a tower for scouts and archers that could fit three people. Even with the tall walls the tower in the middle of the camp was visible, and if one looked close enough they could see the runes inscribed on it in the shape of an hourglass. The top was flat-roofed, with torches on it that were supposed to be lit with the eternal flames of time. This was the Lighthouse of Time, the most important construct here that was supposed to have led them on their way.

The entire camp being eerily empty caused one to be flustered. The flames of time were already extinguished for who knows how long, with the gates wide open. Several huts could be seen inside, some with their doors ajar, but there seemed to be no activity whatsoever.

As Richard was about to enter, he was stopped by Waterflower. She jumped onto the wall, her sword in hand as she looked around. She sniffed the surroundings before nodding her head and jumping in.

Gangdor had a shield in his left hand and a giant axe in his right, storming through the gates. Medium Rare and Tiramisu followed,

the latter's magic defense and iron skin spells finally proving that she was a mage. Only after nearly everyone else entered did Flowsand let go of Richard's hands. However, she was still holding on to his robes.

"I'm not that important!" Richard smiled wryly at Flowsand.

"If you die, so will Waterflower. The others will lose power as well," Flowsand said solemnly.

"Why would you be concerned with all that?" Richard attempted to reason with her.

"The Dragon of Eternity and Light values you more than me. I cannot allow you to die," Flowsand said seriously.

Richard didn't know whether to laugh or cry, so he spoke in an equally solemn manner, "But I've never had the habit of letting a woman defend me."

"Is that a tradition of the Archerons?" Flowsand asked.

"Umm... Probably." It was a simple question, but one Richard found difficult to answer. Fortunately the cleric didn't dwell on the matter, instead letting go. However, five or six holy spells were cast on him by the time he took a few steps. Physical shielding, magic resistance, ranged shielding, poison immunity... There was even a rejuvenation spell! Richard's body shone in all sorts of colours, becoming extremely dazzling. Under such circumstances, it would be difficult for him to die even if he wanted to.

Richard and Flowsand finally entered the base after this minor episode. There was a strange aura all around, so Richard ordered the soldiers to search the perimeter just to be safe, notifying the rest with a whistle if there was an ambush waiting.

The base wasn't large at all, and it took less than ten minutes for the party to survey everything within. Standing on the empty ground in the centre, Richard's expression had grown extremely serious. Flowsand walked out from a hut near him, her expression

not good either.

There were huts designed for a single person to occupy here, but there were also bunks for soldiers, a granary, an armoury, and a general purpose warehouse. This was alongside a smithy, a lab, and even a small pub. However, no matter where one looked there was no sight of anyone at all. There was still some food left on the stove, but the firewood underneath was burnt out! There were dishes placed on the bar, with a half-eaten steak on the ground.

Armour, weapons, and clothes were strewn across the area, every pile being a perfect set of undergarments, robes, outer clothing, and armour. If a stark naked man walked over and picked a bundle off the ground, all he needed was a weapon to be fully armed. Of course there were other sets as well, like those belonging to cooks, mages, and maids. While all these sets were present, the people who should be wearing them were not. It seemed like they had all vanished at once, without any resistance to speak of. It was absurd.

The scouts returned to Richard, but everyone was left alarmed by the bizarre scene. They subconsciously gripped their weapons tightly, staring at the surroundings.

Book 2, Chapter 5 - Annihilation (2)

All of this was no longer justifiable by common spells. A banshee's scream would have left bodies behind, while disjunction would have affected the clothes as well. Either would leave greyish-white dust behind as well, something that was quite difficult to clear. Even a legendary spell like Vampire's Embrace would leave its victims as dry, nearly mummified corpses.

Flowsand walked towards the Lighthouse of Time, touching the patterns carved onto the tower's body. She extended her senses carefully for a moment, before saying, "All of the power of time is gone, and with my current level of power it's impossible to restore. The flames of time are extinguished as well... They were crucial, containing Norland's coordinates. Without them, we can't return to Norland for now. Those in Norland won't be able to track our location either."

"WE'RE LOST?" Olar exclaimed. If they were lost in the streams of time, death was their only fate.

"It's not that serious, you sissy! We've at least come to a plane, and are all gathered together!" Gangdor bellowed.

Gangdor was right, but the circumstances were not optimistic either. Losing the coordinates of their plane meant that they did not know how long they had to stay on this foreign plane. This was no different from being sent into exile.

The only silver lining was that the terrain and life forms were quite similar to Norland's own. It would be relatively easy to gather resources for their survival. Had they been thrown into an elemental plane, or some place like the abyss or hell, they would have trouble even surviving. It also seemed like the base had a complete set of basic supplies, including enough weapons and armour to equip hundreds of men alongside months of rations.

Tiramisu's voice suddenly sounded from the tavern, "This steak

is a little strange. It looks delicious, but it's as if it was here for a few hundred years. I wouldn't dare eat it!"

"Then give it to me, I'm starving! I can tell it's grilled to perfection!" Medium Rare bellowed.

"Let's just bring it to that young lady Flowsand, and have her take a look first. Something's odd about this!" Tiramisu insisted.

The quarrelling trolls squeezed their way out of the tavern. The thick flesh on their large bodies strained against the door a few times before they were able to pass through, gods know how they entered before.

Tiramisu carried a whole steak of lamb over. It seemed like it was just taken off the pan, and Medium Rare's eyes were fixed on it as he constantly swallowed saliva. He really could be called a master of etiquette for a troll, able to restrain himself from drooling even when he was hungry.

Flowsand's slim figure seemed delicate as a reed in the wind in front of the two trolls who were more than 2.5 metres tall. However, the trolls were extremely respectful to her, second only to Richard himself. Tiramisu squatted down on the ground, bending over with much difficulty to present the steak so Flowsand could check more easily.

She gently chanted the spell, the first time she'd ever done so aloud in front of Richard. A ray of golden light was produced from her fingertips, transforming into grains of sand that landed on the steak. The surface shone with a golden radiance immediately, the intensity varying depending on the part of the meat. Some of the areas were completely dim, while on others it was so strong that these grains directly solidified into sands of time. Even then they couldn't hold the energy in, eventually charging towards the sky in a golden fountain.

Flowsand had a grave look on her face. She ordered Tiramisu to place the lamb steak on the floor, "There's some disordered

remnants of the power of time on this. It was likely eroded in the streams of time, but I'm not sure why it's still intact. Some of the parts are new, while others are thousands of years old. If anyone eats this steak, some of their internals will likely age and degrade a thousand years instantly. You should know the outcome of that."

Tiramisu immediately broke out in a sweat. He looked at his own hands, and finding that they weren't showing any strange signs he let out a breath of relief. On the other hand, Rare's legs had given in as he collapsed to the floor. It had never occurred to him that such a delicious steak could contain hidden dangers as well.

Richard had been watching quietly from the side all this while, only speaking after Flowsand stated her conclusion, "Don't you think this is strange? There are many abnormalities at the base. Those soldiers who ambushed us earlier were around level 4 or 5, which was not bad even for Norland's standards. Knight Kojo himself was a level 12 warrior. If this was really a low level plane, how could a robust level 12 warrior only lead less than a hundred soldiers over to battle?"

Flowsand raised her head, waiting for Richard to continue.

Richard went on calmly, "If I'm not mistaken, we are currently in a secondary plane. The greatest powers here might already have reached legendary might if we guess based on Kojo's power. This surely isn't our original destination."

Flowsand said indifferently, "I don't know what has happened, but we clearly deviated from our target destination during the teleportation. The reconnaissance base that originally linked to us was shifted here, so we were led here as well. Without the proper defences, the base did not manage to survive the shift, so all life forms disappeared. That matches with the current situation: everyone in the base ought to have disappeared when it was displaced. That is why there's armour strewn everywhere, with half-cooked food and half-eaten steak. It explains everything we've seen."

“Why?” Richard creased his brows. They had stable coordinates, and he was accompanied by a cleric of the Eternal Dragon itself. How could something like this still happen?

“Anything can happen in the myriad planes,” Flowsand replied. This was an answer based on common sense, but in this situation, it was an answer of extreme helplessness as well.

Flowsand thought for a while, “Someone could deliberately have disrupted the streams of time. From what I know, the Eternal Dragon’s blessings have some hidden rules to them. A certain type of offering can be exchanged in turn for a certain type of blessing, and some ancient families have the methods to choose what they get. Although doing so will give them a weakened blessing, they might deem that appropriate under special circumstances. Richard, you have to consider whether there are people who would pay such a heavy price just to kill you.”

Book 2, Chapter 6 - Annihilation (3)

Richard's brows furrowed as he thought back to the Josephs' assassination attempt. However, he was barely sixteen years of age... Who would pay such a huge price to kill him? But it wasn't the time to ponder about such matters. "I heard that the natives of a plane will treat us as enemies when we first enter it."

Flowsand nodded, "Large scale teleportation like our party's will definitely alert the experts who've grasped the laws of the plane. If this plane is as strong as you claim, then it will house at least a few legendary experts. We're now in an extremely dire situation, what do you plan to do?"

What to do?

Richard inwardly flashed a wry smile. No matter how much they struggled, if the experts of this plane arrived here they would have no chance of survival. Flowsand, Gangdor, Waterflower, the trolls, Olar... Everyone was looking intently at him, waiting for him to come to a decision.

Richard was suddenly alarmed, reminded once again that he was the leader of this party. Even without his sheer power, he would have to make the decisions. The strength of their party, alongside the scouts already sent out, should have ensured that things wouldn't be too rough. However, the destination had been changed to an intermediate plane, so their priority was now mere survival!

Richard looked at Flowsand, asking the critical question, "There's no chance of going back, is there?"

"There are three methods if you wish to go back. First, conquer the entire plane. That will give me the resources to build a tower that can search for the coordinates of the Eternal Dragon. Second, if we're lucky enough we might be able to find some ruins of the Eternal Dragon here. We can activate the church once more,

performing a sacrifice for the blessings to reopen the tunnel to Norland. Third is for us to capture another party coming to this plane.” Flowsand spoke indifferently. As a priestess of the Eternal Dragon, she was naturally familiar with such matters.

Richard surveyed the area again, before he spoke loudly, “I really want to have luck like that, to be able to find the vestige of a church and then return to Norland. But even if we found a church, where are we going to obtain the items to sacrifice? Will obtaining the items to sacrifice to the Eternal Dragon easier than actually conquering the lands here? The item that sent us here was the head of a greater devil!

“We’re already here. As an Archeron, I don’t want to run back home with my head bowed down. I would rather choose the first option. In fact, that is our only choice!”

Richard’s voice resounded in the camp. Archeron... Just that word seemed to have some strange effect on the party. Everyone’s pulse quickened, their hearts coming to life in trepidation as they thirsted for fire and blood. And Richard was the leader of that zeal!

Gangdor roared at that moment, “Hey boss! Your martial arts were extremely dashing when you fought, but if you want to lift our fighting spirits you need to drink wine! That’ll give you the atmosphere!”

Richard stared at Gangdor blankly, “You aren’t nervous?”

Gangdor shrugged his shoulders, “I was a little afraid at first, but now that I think about it the death camp was much more dangerous. Every creature there wanted your life! Since that lass Waterflower isn’t afraid, why should I be?”

Waterflower had her sword hugged close, leaning against the wall. Her eyelids were half-closed, as if she was about to sleep. It was as if she did not hear Gangdor’s provocation at all. It seemed like the current circumstances didn’t matter to her much at all. With her white robes and bared legs, it made for a striking scene.

Richard looked at the two trolls. Medium Rare scratched his head, saying slowly, “I’m just afraid that there will be nothing tasty to eat!”

Tiramisu raised its fist and smashed it against Medium Rare’s skull, “All you know is eating! It’ll be perfect if there’s trolls in this plane. We can infiltrate their camps.

“The ten most beautiful ones are mine! You can start from the eleventh!”

Medium Rare jumped and howled, “No way! You get the best one, that’s it!”

“I’m a mage!”

“So what?”

The two trolls were going at each other’s throats by then, so Richard turned to Olar. The bard’s face was still ashen, he hadn’t completely recovered yet. Perhaps it was the blood loss due to the injury, or maybe he was just afraid, but he shot a weak smile when he met Richard’s gaze.

However, he hesitated a bit before looking at Flowsand. He mustered up his courage, “If the beautiful Miss Flowsand could give me some encouragement, perhaps a sweet kiss, I’ll be filled with courage!”

Flowsand smiled gently, “You’re teasing a priestess of the Eternal Dragon. Aren’t you afraid of losing lifespan?”

Olar was stumped, not daring to press on. He turned elsewhere for his courage, this time to Waterflower, “If this beautiful lady can give me some encouragement, I’ll be bold enough to conquer the whole plane!”

Waterflower’s brows twitched as she opened an eye. She stared at the elven bard and said indifferently, “When the environment is better.”

Olar's face suddenly flushed red. He opened his arms out to the skies, as if wanting to embrace something. He then turned to Richard, getting on one knee before proclaiming, "You have the most courageous warrior, my Lord!"

Richard did not know what to say. He could vaguely sense the girl's thoughts through their connection, and she didn't try to hide her feelings. While she had spoken the truth, it was only technically so. This scene was filled with many chops and slices, but it didn't seem appropriate to tell the elven romantic the truth.

It was only then that Richard realised it would not be easy to lead a party. He could not fathom how Gaton had managed to amass thirteen knights under his banner. From Mordred to Lina, they all had their own quirks. And each of them were not to be trifled with, and were not saints.

And now, Gangdor propped his chin with his hands and looked at Olar like one would at a fool. He had wanted to laugh, because he felt like there was a sense of accomplishment looking at somebody acting like this.

"The baron's troops may appear shortly." Flowsand interjected.

Richard inhaled deeply, "We can deal with a baron. I have to hurry and try to understand the seed." Indeed, the seed, that azure grey egg, was the only resource they hadn't used.

"Seed..." Flowsand's body shuddered. Richard looked at her, but he could only see her head bowed down with a blank expression.

Book 2, Chapter 7 - Seed

Everyone was aware that the fight just then was only a beginning. Endless battles would ensue, and they would be the enemies of all the inhabitants of the plane. Thus, they all went their separate ways once the situation was clarified for now, busying themselves almost as if they were puppets powered by magic crystals.

Flowsand began conducting checks all over the base. The Lighthouse of Time was a magical building, blessed with the supreme power of the Eternal Dragon itself. Although the entirety of the building could be seen on this plane, a part of it was actually connected to a rift in the void. This rift was what allowed it to guide travellers, but even with the flames extinguished this meant the magic arrays still connected this base to the rift. Extra precaution had to be taken, lest a crack in the void tearing the place apart, or worse, swallowing it whole.

Besides, traces of turbulent time flows were still scattered in various corners of the base. This was fatal to a commoner, but as a cleric of the Eternal Dragon Flowsand could use this power to replenish her own, or even gradually strengthen her mana.

She measured it silently in her heart. If she could clear out the power of time from the entire base, she would be able to advance to level 9. Even if she still wouldn't be able to cast grade 5 spells, her energy pool would increase to an extent. It could count as having profited off a disaster.

On the other hand, the knights grew busy packing up the mess of weapons and armour that Flowsand had already sorted out. These supplies were extremely useful, with the better equipment besting even what they'd brought along on the trip. A lot of the supplies on their trip had been magic resources. After all, their leader was a runemaster. The weapons and armour they could prepare paled in comparison.

As they packed everything up, they also buried their dead comrades right next to the base. If the day came when they could return home, they would take their ashes along back to Norland. Otherwise, they would end up fertilising the same earth.

The enemies were buried or cremated as well. Norland's code of chivalry espoused respect for deceased enemies, and any mishandling of opponent corpses was considered disgraceful and dishonorable. However, all weapons, armour, and personal belongings left behind by the deceased enemies were considered spoils of war, and would be recovered carefully.

On the other side, Waterflower and Gangdor were exploring the surrounding terrain. Olar had initially wanted to tag along with Waterflower, but for some unknown reason decided to stay behind in the end. As Gangdor left, he looked back at the elf with regret.

Of course, the bard didn't stay behind for nothing. Richard immediately assigned him to interrogating the surviving captives for more intel. Sir Kojo was merely a sentry, and had a baron backing him up. Who, then, was backing up the baron?

The two trolls ran outside the base, plopping down at a random spot to nap. With their natural vitality, they could recover with mere food and sleep. The two arrows that nearly killed Olar would only be minor injuries to them, ones that would heal in a couple of days.

Flowsand had completed a rough check of the base by the time dusk fell. Thankfully, she didn't find any rifts in spacetime. As soon as the power of time was cleared out, the base could be put to use once again. The provisions, weapons, arrows, and other supplies stocked within were an immediate solution to Richard's desperate situation, with enough to equip hundreds of soldiers.

Seeing that everything in the base was in good order, Richard left on his own. He found an empty plot of land, preparing to try and plant the 'seed'. The area he chose was on high ground, within

sight of the base. He would be able to rush over immediately if there was a problem.

At that moment, Richard had the seed in his hands. The azure eggshell trembled continuously, almost as if there was a little life inside waiting to burst through at any moment. Richard believed that the seed was a special life form; its life force was growing increasingly powerful, almost as if it had absorbed some power when they were crossing planes. The closer he held it to himself, the stronger the pulse of the being within grew.

What could possibly be in this egg? A frightening biological weapon? A magical beast? Something that could cause even high priestess Ferlyn to lose a great deal of her blessing to reveal little information about was likely much stronger than a mere lesser dragon.

The eggshell was like an impregnable fort, standing strong in the face of the strikes of the life within. With the egg in hand, Richard was at a loss for what to do. The seed didn't respond at all to his mana.

It was when he tried to project a strand of his consciousness in an attempt to look within that something changed. Richard's consciousness was pulled in, flooding frantically into the seed! An excruciating pain hit him, and he felt as though his head was about to split apart. His very soul felt like it was being torn apart with great strength; if not for his tenacity and willpower, he would have fainted then and there. However, the flow of his consciousness continued on uninterrupted, with no way to stop in sight.

Richard was well aware that a failure to stop this would lead to his soul itself being drawn out. However, the pull from the seed was so large that none of his attempts worked. The acute pain tormented him, leaving him paralysed and unable to move. He couldn't utter a single word, or even throw the seed away.

Although Richard's consciousness was far stronger than those of

his peers, he did not have infinite power. All of his strength was exhausted in the blink of an eye, the tremendous force then pulling his soul itself towards the shell. At this moment, brilliant rays of light erupted from several magic symbols in his sea of consciousness— the imprints of his soul contract and slave contracts! Formidable power suddenly grabbed firmly onto Richard's drifting soul, going head-on against the force of the seed.

CRACK! Richard felt something snap deep in his consciousness. His soul was torn apart by the two great powers, a small bit of it sucked in by the seed with force. His vision blacked out, before he collapsed onto the floor. His taut nerves had relaxed in a flash.

At the same time, Waterflower who's been prancing around in the trees suddenly fell head-first to the ground. She had lost consciousness.

In yet another direction, a running Gangdor abruptly clutched his head, yelling in pain. His mind was sent into chaos, rendering him unable to distinguish directions as he ran into a large tree. A loud snap sounded, and this tree that was more than ten feet in diameter actually broke in half as Gangdor crashed into it.

Outside the base, the two sleeping trolls awoke with a start. They bolted up at the same time, clutching their heads as they howled in anguish. In the base itself, a certain elven bard spouted a mouthful of blood and fainted at a crucial moment in his interrogation.

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Not long after he lost consciousness, Richard was awakened by the feeling of a pinprick. Barely able to raise his head, he saw the seed that was stuck to his cheek fall in front of his eyes. His vision was filled with azure blue, glossy and gentle; it lacked the pores that were present on normal eggs.

An indistinct mind suddenly transmitted a message from within the seedling, a faint voice ringing at the bottom of Richard's heart, "Blood... Blood..."

Book 2, Chapter 8 - Seed

Having absorbed a piece of Richard's soul, the larva in the egg had built a spiritual connection with Richard, just like the one he shared with Waterflower. It hadn't cracked its shell open yet, but it was already asking for Richard's blood.

Its calls were quite feeble, almost as though they were about to fade away. However, that thirst was exceptionally distinct. Richard lost himself in a trance for a moment, not catching on until he felt some warmth from his face. He wiped with his hand, finding his palm covered in red.

It was only then that Richard found his mouth was reeking of blood as well. This was probably due to injuries inflicted to his organs when he was trying to withstand the severe pain of having his soul torn apart. Blood was also flowing out of his nose and the corners of his eyes, which was why it covered his face.

"Blood..." the seed was still calling out. This was no known language, instead a fluctuation that bombarded his very soul with the request. He decided to simply smear the blood on his hands onto that flawlessly smooth and shiny eggshell.

The moment he did so, all of the blood was consumed. Richard could tell in his mind that the life within the egg was beginning to grow rapidly, ever changing as its presence grew stronger and stronger. By the end, even he himself had to shudder.

The 'seed' asked for no more blood. That single drop was akin to a spark, igniting the fires of its life. A soft click rang out, and a visible crack appeared on the eggshell, soon followed by many more. A sharp blade of darkness eventually made its way out, signifying that the egg had hatched. The 'seed' had sprouted.

The eggshell shattered with that blade as the centre, pieces falling to the ground as what seemed like a black insect crawled out from within. This creature had six limbs like an arthropod, with

an exceptionally large abdomen. Two sharp blades were attached to the area near its head, making it look like a comical little ball with a few blades stuck on it.

The creature dived for the remainder of the eggshell the moment it made its way out, chewing it all up in the blink of an eye. It cleared the fragments out thoroughly, leaving nothing behind at all. It was like a vacuum had sucked everything on the ground away.

Another thing the creature did was cleaning up Richard's bloodstains. It was unknown how exactly it managed to absorb all the blood, but the grass had lost all remains of his blood.

The creature then forced itself up, its entire body trembling rapidly as the sticky fluid on its surface was rapidly absorbed within. Its shell gradually grew hard, beginning to sparkle even as its body grew at a visible pace. Clearing the remnants of the eggshell on the ground, it lifted up its torso with all its might, looking at Richard with six pairs of eyes. The complex organ that it had for a mouth began to open and close rapidly.

Numerous unintelligible syllables rang out in Richard's consciousness, incessant, rapid, and chaotic. It took a while for them to transform into a clear, albeit peculiar, voice, the voice of this newborn creature. It had just been looking for a way to communicate with Richard, and it had identified that to be Norland's common tongue instead of the spiritual wave it had used before.

"Need... High-energy... Food." The creature struggled to express itself.

"You are the seed?" Richard probed.

"Seed... Hibernation... For when we travel." It still couldn't formulate a proper sentence.

"We? What are you?" Richard asked.

The voice grew unclear once more when Richard asked that question, growing comprehensible again with great difficulty, “We... I not sure. I don’t know what we are... Memory only goes back to birth. Everything before is... blank... I am a broodmother, exist to exterminate enemies.”

“Who are your enemies then?” Richard asked warily. This little creature had just been born, but it was already giving off an aura that made him shudder. Its enemies would definitely be even harder to deal with.

“Your enemies are my enemies, Master.” This time, the reply was fluent and clear.

“You call me your master?”

“Yes, you brought me to life. Only my predetermined... Master can bring me to life. I will follow... orders.”

Richard squatted down, looking at this little creature that seemed to be a bizarre insect, “Broodmother... What kind of food do you survive on?”

“Blood, flesh... all kinds of life... energy crystals...” it answered with some difficulty, making the problem of vocabulary obvious. “I’m still in my first stage, larva. I can scavenge for food on my own. I still need to learn your language, Master. That will require a day.”

Richard was a little speechless. Even grand mages with the assistance of language proficiency spells would need at least half a month to master a language fully. Even basic communication needed three days, but this newborn was saying it would need just one!

“I’ll go get you something to eat, there are still some food reserves left in the base. You were just born, and might meet with danger outside.”

“No, I can feel it. Over here... I don’t have any predators.” The

broodmother then opened up the shell on its back, revealing small wings. It flapped them hard, getting its body airborne until it was level with Richard's eyes. It then flew into the jungle, slow and clumsy.

All of a sudden, Richard was startled. Precision told him that this creature was already half a fold larger than when it was just born, the increased size equivalent to the mass of the eggshell it had ingested. This was near lossless absorption of food, a terrifying prospect!

Subconsciously, Richard felt an indescribable fear towards this creature he had never heard of before. There were no magic records accounting for its presence, and while it looked like a beautiful shiny insect right now it chilled him down to the spine.

Richard could remember several life forms even more peculiar than the broodmother. Even the subterra of Norland had creatures like soul-sucking devils and driders, as well as the people of the sea. However, no matter how hideous and horrifying these races were, or how destructive or eerie their powers could get, there was normally a lot of recorded information about them. They were formidable, yes, but not frightening. Only the unknown frightens men.

Richard could tell the broodmother's rough position through their soul connection, just like he could with Waterflower. He was even able to touch upon its mind, a lifeless icy world devoid of emotion. The truly frightening part was the appalling focus of its thoughts. At this moment, the entirety of its being was devoted to its search for food. That was its one directive: to consume food rapidly so it could grow past its larval stage.

The broodmother's functions? Richard received information that it would be shown to him once it was finished with the task.

At that moment, Flowsand ran over with two knights alongside her. She only let out a sigh of relief once she saw him safe and well

in the distance, probing, “What happened? Are you alright?”

“I just succeeded in planting the seed. It contained a ‘broodmother,’ and the creature is already off scavenging for food. Do you know anything about these things?” Richard looked unsettled.

He described the creature’s appearance in detail, but Flowsand said she hadn’t seen nor heard of such a thing before. However, this was not the first time that the Eternal Dragon had blessed someone with the unknown. These discoveries enhanced their own records.

Since the broodmother had already formed a connection with his soul, she said there wasn’t much cause for worry. With it being a contract creature bestowed by the Eternal Dragon itself, there would certainly be no problem.

Book 2, Chapter 9 - Message

A moment later, Richard returned to the base alongside Flowsand. He'd already understood the situation, having sorted out his priorities. The first and foremost task was to gather information, both about the incoming baron and their environment. Next was to boost everyone's morale, and finally was the problem of forming an army in this plane.

Everyone contracted to Richard rushed back to the base as well, making sure that he was safe. Richard reassigned their roles, sending Olar out alongside Gangdor and Waterflower to inspect the terrain. The trolls, now awake, would help the knights clean up the battlefield and repair equipment.

Tiramisu would get to showcase his skills, transcribing a large number of language proficiency scrolls. The first step to root themselves in this plane would be conquering the language barrier.

With Olar's progress on the interrogation being lacklustre, Richard decided to interrogate the captives himself. Flowsand would assist him, keeping them from dying if he lost control.

Olar had already found out some information, but he was so gentle that he was slowed down at key points. They gave him illogical, contradicting statements on the number of soldiers and knights the baron had, and even their original follow-up plan as well as the relief of the Baron's territory. With the intense sense of crisis enveloping his heart, Richard had already lost his patience.

Every passing hour at that point signified growing danger. Perhaps the baron's army was already on its way, or the deities had sent out a new order through their oracles. How could he afford to let these captives waste any more of his precious time?

Richard was still in a daze as he walked into the small but well-equipped interrogation room. The two captives originally felt like they could bear more punishment, but they shriveled with cold as

he walked into the room. The very light in the place seemed to have dimmed.

The duo were covered with injuries, but none of them were serious. They both looked to be in their thirties, of strong build and seemingly of decent skill as well. Level 5 warriors as they were, their sharp gazes indicated that they were determined to just survive whatever they were put through. They were likely veterans.

With just one look Richard realised that this would be relatively difficult to handle, but there were no solutions for that. Two kinds of people could not be defeated by torture: ones with strong faith, and those who would protect something no matter what.

These soldiers were observing Richard as well. He'd walked in expressionlessly, and the sight of his, long, exquisite, and stable arms, their gazes changed. When they saw Flowsand walk in behind him, the two who could tease the elven bard finally had a change in expression.

Richard quickly went through the tools in his hands, inspecting the warriors' injuries. His movements were swift and skilled, practised countless times when he was at Naya's tavern. The procedure had been drilled into him so well that he could be accurate without even thinking. That was one of the most authentic skills of the underworld.

Richard didn't speak a word from the moment he walked into the interrogation room, just taking care of his tasks silently. That scared these soldiers.

"Hey. Hey!" one of them shouted as Richard chained him up, "What are you trying to do, kid?"

Richard turned a deaf ear to any threats and howls, just hanging the man up and reaching for his tools.

"AH! CURSE YOU, HERETIC! YOU SHALL BURN IN FLAMES!"

The warrior's cries penetrated the interrogation room, spreading out into the rest of the base. Richard remained quick and steady, not stopping regardless of the volume of the man's screams. One by one, all his tools were stained by blood and thrown away. Flowsand had already begun casting lesser heals, having to cast the spell a total of seven times by the time Richard went through his entire repertoire once. The soldier had lost all energy, his former rage now just soft moans coming from his throats.

"Next." This was Richard's first word since he stepped into the interrogation room.

"No! Don't touch me, I'll tell you whatever you want to—AAAH!" The first warrior had been let down, and the second hung up instead. Richard didn't even consider listening to the man's words, repeating the process once more.

Five minutes and six lesser heals later, the tools had been exhausted once more. This time, Flowsand had even needed to cast a greater healing spell to keep him alive. The two were returned to their original positions, still covered with injuries. They looked about the same as they had ten minutes ago, but the arrogance in their eyes had completely disappeared.

Richard threw the blood-stained tools into a pail of cold water with a loud crash. He conveniently washed his hands as well, sitting in front of the soldiers, "Now, what do you folks have to say? Just so you know, the cleric has only used a third of her mana."

Minutes later, Richard had gathered everything he needed to know. He'd 'questioned' them several times, ensuring that they were not lying. The soldiers fainted a few times throughout the process, but were awakened by splashes of cold water, keeping them from losing their consciousness.

Cold water was the best thing to use in these kinds of situations, not magic. Bone-chilling moisture enveloping one's entire body

was the most refreshing of ‘medicine’, the streams of water trickling down the back and droplets falling off the hair keeping one awake.

By the time they were sure they couldn’t get any more clues, Richard and Flowsand met gazes. Both sensed the worry in the other’s mind. They had confirmed that this was an intermediate plane, with great military might. Their reconnaissance base had ended up in the Whiterock Duchy, a land of complex terrain that was made mostly of mountain and forest. There was a river flowing through this land, more than ten kilometres away, keeping the land outside the mountain range fertile and arable. At the bend of the river was Baron Forza’s castle, alongside a port city. Kojo had been one of five knights subordinate to him.

The plane had plenty of rain and fertile soil, allowing them to develop their agriculture to a level where food was abundant enough to support a large population. There were nearly 200,000 people living in a few hundred square kilometres, with a corresponding standing army of over a thousand people with dozens of knights in training.

The tradition in this plane allowed any commoner to be knighted on the basis of merit and power, granting them a small fief with a manor. However, one had to be over level 10 to be afforded such treatment. Forza was only level 8 at more than fifty years of age, but that didn’t lessen the danger Richard was facing. The Baron’s huge army could extinguish Richard’s tiny party that had less than twenty men.

Moreover, the Baron was the ruling noble of this large territory. If there was a crisis he could mobilise retired veterans, freemen, mercenaries and trained youths into a militia that was twice the size of the army. Of course that still meant less than two hundred leaders that were over level 5, with the rest weaker than that.

Book 2, Chapter 10 - Message

This finally explained Kojo's formidable forces. The soldiers following him weren't his own subordinates, instead elites from the baron's army. Warriors normally chose a specialisation at level 5, be that archery or martial arts, giving them the ability to rival three to five level 4s.

The situation of this plane was quite similar to Norland's. Both planes had numerous intelligent creatures, but at least in the Whiterock Duchy humans were in control. Status was based on a line of succession or military merit, which promoted a healthy martial culture amongst the people of the plane, quite like Norland. However, that military culture only spelled bad news for Richard.

The main god of the Whiterock Duchy was the God of Valour, Neian. There were other gods that Flowsand hadn't heard of before as well, likely including aboriginal ones. The number of devotees would put Neian at an intermediate god, with five or six other regions of similar outreach. Ancestral worship was quite common here as well, with humans not losing out to the beastmen and elves in that regard.

Baron Forza was a strong devotee of Neian, and had recently set up an altar to the deity within his castle. The priest had recently been given an oracle, prompting the baron to send Kojo on a manhunt alongside his troops, tracking down the intruders to their plane. Were he to suffer defeat, the main army would follow.

Richard and Flowsand made their way to an empty plot. Richard moved a table out, while Flowsand placed a map made from the captives' information onto the table.

Their base hadn't ended up in a particularly good or bad situation, about five kilometres away from the end of the mountain path. The terrain and dense forestry served to block any

cavalry from advancing, forcing even titled knights like Kojo to advance to the base on foot.

The base itself was located on an abrupt miniature cliff. On three sides were steep slopes, with only the main entrance being a gentle road. With the cliffs being more than twenty metres tall, it would take a knight in training to scale them during battle.

However, if they retreated to the base they would end up trapped.

Richard scrutinised the map, deliberating over it repeatedly before he pointed at a small town about twenty kilometres from the base. “If the Baron’s troops have already set off, they’ll arrive here by tonight. This place is the last chance for them to replenish their supplies and get some rest before entering the mountains. They’re likely to try and track us down at first light, so if we scout this place out now we’ll be able to get some general details about those troops.”

“They might have brought some priests along this time,” Flowsand remarked, “Those should be our first targets. I’m not sure if they’ll have mages as well,”

Richard nodded in agreement. Staring at this map of the towns and villages under Forza, he silently made his own calculations, “It hasn’t even been a day yet, and the reaction to Kojo not answering shouldn’t be this immediate. With the upgraded equipment and levels of the troop, they wouldn’t expect the entire force to have been annihilated. Baron Forza will be unlikely to turn out in full strength tomorrow as well. The oracle should have mentioned our numbers and strength, but that shouldn’t tell them about the number of people we have that are skilled at spying and assassination. The losses we’ll suffer the first time around will be negligible, we’ll meet a third of his army at most. About two titled knights, a dozen novices, and two to three hundred soldiers.”

Contemplating over it for some time, Richard looked to Flowsand

and asked solemnly, “Flowsand, I need to know how much better you are than a regular cleric. I need to accurately deduce our military strength.”

Flowsand raised her head, fixing her gaze upon Richard before going, “Sure, but let’s start with you. Don’t tell me that a normal level 8 mage can set off five fireballs within five seconds. You should have been handicapped just from the mana cost, forget how quickly you cast the spells. I would also appreciate it if you explained the four boars you summoned as well.”

Richard chuckled, nodding, “Alright. I have a vitality rune tattooed onto myself that can speed up my energy and mana recovery. I also have enhanced control of my abilities. I may be a level 8 mage, but my mana pool is close to level 9.

“My main focus amongst grade 3 spells is Fireball, and at grade 4 it’s Nature’s Beckon and Icicle Storm. I’ve enhanced the fireball spell to allow me to quickcast it in under a second, and allowed it to consume less mana than normal as well. Nature’s Beckon might be due to my elven bloodline, but it’s effects are boosted when I cast it. As for Icicle, even if I haven’t perfected it yet it has immense power. However, it takes five seconds for me to cast it, too much to be useful in actual battle.”

Richard hadn’t explained things completely. The ivory bracelet sitting snugly on his wrist had proved to have another function: it was easier for him to communicate with his summons. That’s why he managed to summon an additional boar.

“What about your bloodline abilities?” Flowsand continued to ask relentlessly.

Richard hesitated, before explaining, “I’ve only awakened one so far— Eruption.”

Flowsand lowered her head, writing in the air with her fingers. It took a while for her to reply, “Great, I think I know how to support you in battle now. Alright, my turn. I’m different from the average

priest. I'm a cleric, titled Daybreak by the Eternal Dragon. You can assume I have thrice the mana reserve of an ordinary priest of my level.

"You have also noticed the rune on my forehead before. I acquired it along with my title, and it gives me a special ability called the Lens of Time. It allows me to change the time flow of a target for fifteen seconds, with half a chance of being successful if the target is five levels higher than me and no chance at all at seven levels of difference."

"How much can you speed them up?" Richard's eyes lit up.

"For now? About four-thirds the normal timeflow. That will increase with my level."

"Great! That gives us a way to deal with those knights!" Richard could not contain his excitement. He took a look over Flowsand, "I'm thankful we're not enemies."

This time, Flowsand showed him an elusive smile, "So am I."

Richard beamed. They could finally see a glimpse of light on the horizon.

Book 2, Chapter 11 - Battle

Thinking over things for a moment, Richard continued, “If the army coming for us is as we expect, we have a chance at success. Our first job is to ambush them once they enter the mountains, killing all their priests in one go before retreating to the base. We can then make use of the natural defence, slowly whittling down their numbers, bleeding them out until they can’t handle the losses anymore and have to retreat. Normally a commander here pulls back their troops once a third of the army is destroyed, unless they have a special mission or fixed target. We should be able to hold on until then. The ordinary soldiers are fine, but our primary targets should be their knights and novices. Attack from the walls and kill them instantly!”

Flowsand spoke up, “I should remind you about the broodmother.”

“The broodmother? It’s still a larva...” Richard found her line of thought strange.

“Perhaps so, but it still has offensive abilities. You remember what it said when it told you it could forage for food itself.”

Richard furrowed his brows, put deep into thought. His mind connected with the broodmother the moment he thought of it, sensing that it had already captured some prey deep inside the forest and was halted there. It was eating, radiating satisfaction through their link.

‘Return to the base early tomorrow,’ Richard ordered, and the broodmother replied with an affirmative.

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Night fell slowly in this unfamiliar land. The sky was an inky, near-black blue, with only one moon that emitted pale light that was practically drowned out by the resplendent stars that filled the

skies. There were far more here that could be seen with the naked eye than on Norland, so crowded that they made the night sky look like the skirt of a lady, adorned with pearls.

The little town of Osfa would normally be in the world of dreams at this time, but there was a large clamour throughout the place. Teams of fully armed soldiers were stood guard right outside, with only the knights able to sleep comfortably on beds within. Their squires were in the town as well, taking over the residents' homes.

None of the residents of the town were asleep, instead busy preparing supper for the soldiers and aristocrats who'd come from afar. The town had a total population of merely 300, and with about the same number of soldiers suddenly having joined with ten or so powerful people that even the mayor had to bow his head to, the place was naturally in chaos. Forget the knights themselves, even the squires could do as they wished in the town.

The mayor was now stood inside his own small yet intricate dining hall, respectfully facing a few aristocrats who were comfortably bent over their food.

Sat in the middle was a middle-aged man with a thick moustache and bear-like stature, seemingly about forty years of age. He had a vicious scar on his neck, his high-collared linen shirt leaving it exposed. The scar was incredibly eye-catching, like a fleshy red mollusk just resting on his neck.

The knight swallowed a piece of searing hot beef, raising his head to look at the mayor, "Is there still no word from Sir Kojo?"

"No, Esteemed Sir Menta."

"He might just have met with some trouble. It looks like we'll have to be more cautious," Menta said.

"We have priests with us, what's there to be afraid of?" a malicious-looking man at the other end of the table asked, obviously showing little respect for Menta, "Didn't high priest

Camy say the God of Valour told him that the invaders were quite ordinary? I think Kojo just discovered something valuable from the invaders, and is planning to take it all himself. If he sends word back his share of blessings and credit will be divided with us.”

A hint of anger arose on Menta’s face, “Kojo is just the vanguard! I’m the leader here!”

“Who knows? Don’t forget that the people Kojo brought with him were all elites, proficient in battle on hilly terrain. How could there be no news at all?” The man shrugged before continuing, “Perhaps he won’t be the vanguard anymore once we get back.”

Menta hummed loudly, speaking no longer. He instead brandished his fork and knife, furiously stabbing at the beef on his plate.

A few pairs of eyes were making use of the cover provided by the forest at the outskirts of the town, watching from the branches to monitor any movements. Gangdor leapt off the top of a tree, displaying agility not befitting of his physique. His landing was soundless— if someone wanted to engage in guerilla warfare based on his looks, they were likely to land deep in trouble.

Richard was stood under the tree, making use of the shadows to conceal himself. He had no experience in stealth battles, so he didn’t dare scout as close to the enemy as Waterflower and Gangdor did.

Gangdor approached Richard, “I’m done counting, boss. There’s two knights, fifteen novices, and 280 soldiers, out of which 80 are elites. If we take care of all of them, and adding on those we already wiped out, two thirds of Forza’s elites will be done for.”

Richard nodded, “Good, let’s return. The ambush will be at the place we determined yesterday, Waterflower will keep watch here.”

Gangdor nodded, cooing out like a bird. This was the sound of

the local owls, something he'd learnt on the way. Olar showed himself from the other side of the forest, his mostly elven heritage giving him the ability to move around freely. Bards had numerous little skills that allowed them to conceal themselves.

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The skies began to brighten, and Osfa grew noisy. The knights had tidied up with the aid of their servants, finishing their breakfast. Soldiers formed lines outside the town, joining up with the novice knights to advance into the mountains.

Less than a kilometre after the town they found the end of the path. The horses could travel no further, so the knights and novices got off their mounts and had their servants bring them back to the town. In the meanwhile, the lower-ranked soldiers headed deeper into the mountains. The knights and novices changed into chainmail that was two grades worse than before; although they could bear tens or even hundreds of kilograms of weight, without their mounts it would be difficult for them to navigate the soft earth with that weight. Energy couldn't be wasted, and what they would lose bearing the weight of heavy armour over such a long distance would be enough protect their entire bodies from one or two attacks.

Besides the two knights with their magic helmets, the most striking members of the troop were the two priests. They were dressed in crimson robes with rounded collars, the only difference between them being the gold embroidery on those of the older one signifying higher rank. The surrounding soldiers were extremely respectful to the two priests, their reverence surpassing what they had even for the knights.

Menta may have had a horrid temper, but he was quite practical when it came to his troops. He'd already sent out the lightly armoured scouts, clearing the path ahead and the places surrounding them. However, the further they went into the forest the longer their formation stretched. The general location of the

invaders had already been passed down through the oracle, so they were marching in a fixed path. The knights knew very well about the areas where there was a high chance of ambush. Menta took the lead, while Sir Huber was at the rear alongside four novice knights, protecting the priests.

When they came upon a steep incline, Menta looked at the peak of the slope with unease filling his heart. However, the area was wide and spacious, with an ambush not really a possibility here. The scouts had also signalled that there was nothing to worry about, so he walked over with large strides.

The face of an elven bard slowly showed itself from the top of a large, leafy tree on the slope. He was practically one with the tree, stuck to its thick bark with very little presence of his own. He even swayed slightly to the tune of the wind.

Olar's gaze fell onto the two priests that had just entered his sights. In the shrubbery at the foot of the tree were the corpses of two scouts, still warm. The bard slowly pulled his bow, the arrow's tip gradually pointing at the priests. There were two of them? This was an unexpected situation, but the decision was a simple one to make. Shoot the one with the most elaborate clothing, and one couldn't go wrong.

Book 2, Chapter 12 - Battle (2)

Drawing his longbow back to the fullest, Olar knocked on a branch with an end of the bow. The trolls walked out atop the hill, panting heavily as they threw an enormous rock weighing multiple tons down the slope. It rolled down with ferocious momentum, heading right into the middle of the advancing troops.

The two priests turned to look, and their faces filled with extreme panic. They were right in the path of the rock! It was rumbling down like thunder, fierce winds already buffeting their faces.

Someone with great strength like Sir Menta could withstand the force behind that rock, but outside of that even a novice knight would be dealt a serious injury if they were hit. The most likely targets would be the priests and the novice knights guarding them, so the troops immediately went into a frenzy. They ran all over the place, disrupting their formations and spreading chaos. Some people were knocked down, losing their orientation when they got back up and running back into the path of the rock instead.

The trolls let loose an astonishingly violent roar, stomping the ground with all their might. The entire slope trembled at once, causing the rolling rock to shift direction slightly towards the frontlines. The situation immediately worsened.

Olar chose that exact moment, narrowing his eyes as he let go of the arrow in his right hand. It shot forth, sheathed in a layer of light green mana that imbued it with a minor targeting enchantment.

Sir Menta hadn't bothered stopping his subordinates from running wildly all over the place. Just as he was about to charge forward to block the rock, he'd seen a flash of red in his vision. A fireball had been shot out from the jungle, aimed at a group of soldiers huddled together amidst the chaos. It wouldn't take more

than two seconds to reach its target, and the soldiers would be unable to escape the blaze that would soon engulf them.

He'd bellowed in fury, snatching a heavy shield and rushing over in large strides. He just managed to intercept the fireball in the midst of its flight! The spell exploded loudly on the surface of the shields, sending waves of magical flames everywhere. Menta held the shield firmly, however, not taking a single step back. Glowing energy pushed the fires away.

The edges of the shield had softened a little by the time the heat wave passed, but Menta himself hadn't been hurt in the slightest. However, his sharp ears caught onto the faint yet shrill whistle of an enchanted arrow, rapidly approaching him.

The knight had rushed out from behind the shield, only to see a long arrow sparkling with magic pass him by, plunging its way through the older priest's back! The tip poked through the other side, a faint sound echoing forth from his body as an indication that his internals were damaged. Looking at how the priest had fallen to the ground, there seemed to be no life left in him anymore at all.

A priest had been killed!

"Damn it!" Sir Menta's eyes were practically on fire as he drew his saber, bellowing in rage before rushing towards the slope. The alerted knights whipped out their weapons at once, their bodies glowing in different colours of energy. They charged towards the attackers at full speed, a few of the faster ones already next to Menta by the time they made it up the slope.

However, the instant they rushed into the jungle they saw Richard. Both his hands were held flat out, and he'd just completed the last line of an incantation.

A frigid wind poured out from Richard's hands, countless icicles forming in the air. Menta immediately recognised this to be a level 4 spell, shouting for everyone to be careful even as his own

footsteps came to a halt at once. He planted the large shield firmly on the ground before him, shrinking behind it completely. A direct blow from the spell would leave even him seriously injured.

The novice knights quickly entered defensive stances as well, securing themselves in their locations one after the other. However, one of them hadn't reacted in time, rushing two steps forward into the rain of icicles.

The winds lasted for but two seconds, countless icicles continuously ramming into Menta's large shield. Clinks echoed in his surroundings as the icicles struck the armour or gauntlet shields of the knights in his surroundings. A few painful howls rang out.

When the wind finally stopped, the surface of Menta's body was covered in a thick layer of frost. He shook it all off in a jerking motion, letting it disintegrate and fall to the ground. Although his face was still frosted over, he prioritised taking in his surroundings. All of the novices were injured to some extent, with one being severely hurt. Their armour had been limited for the sake of easy movement, but now they had paid the price. The mage himself was nowhere to be seen.

"Leave ten behind. Carry him down, and protect the priest's dead body. The rest are to follow me. The mage has already cast two spells, so he has another two fireballs left at most. What's there to be afraid of? Chase them!" Menta roared. The novice knights led the soldiers in a charge into the forest, swiftly running along the tracks Richard had left to hunt him down.

The heavy infantry clearly couldn't move fast enough to catch up to their enemies, but the scouts managed to track Richard down. After chasing them down for a few kilometres, a novice knight adept at agility and mountain combat returned to report that they'd discovered a base ahead of them. The invaders had escaped behind the high walls.

That did not alarm Menta, pleasing him instead, “The bastards ran back into their den? Perfect! Follow me, we will end them all!”

A moment later, Menta’s troops had already completely encircled the reconnaissance base. The knight wasn’t anxious to attack, instead circling its perimeter and thoroughly familiarising himself with its layout before he returned to the main entrance. He turned to the perspiring younger priest, “Is this the invaders’ base?”

The young priest looked at a map, replying with absolute certainty, “This is where the oracle pointed us!”

Menta nodded, saying to the young priest, “Hide in the back, and do not use your powers randomly. My soldiers could still need you to save their lives, I will appoint people to protect you.”

Soon after, a small group of soldiers escorted the priest and retreated back into the jungle. Menta did not want anything to happen to him—priests had high status, and any further casualties would be difficult to explain to the church. Even if they captured all the invaders and brought them back for divine trial, that would only be considered atoning for their sins. Anyway, he didn’t think a mere level 3 priest was capable of many useful spells.

All his troops were gathered by this point. Menta squinted, looking at the base a few dozen metres away. The walls were made of stone, about four metres tall, and the entrance had two thick wooden doors that were tightly shut. There were archery towers beside the entrance, with marksmen already stationed on top. The grave demeanour of those archers was proof enough of their outstanding capabilities.

“That’s already comparable to a knight. Bastard!” Menta cursed under his breath. His gaze landed on Richard atop the entrance, recognising him as the mage who’d ambushed them in the jungle. Richard was in a dangerous yet crucial position, the sight making Menta want to shoot an arrow at him immediately. However, this fellow had managed to escape in the jungle with speed unbecoming

of a mage, and he himself wasn't confident enough in his archery to shoot him down successfully.

Moreover, there was a warrior with a tower shield at the mage's side. More than 1.5 metres tall, it made it practically impossible to kill the mage with a single arrow.

Sir Menta stroked his beard, a sinister smile gradually creeping onto his face. He waved his large hand forward, "Teams one to three, attack!"

Book 2, Chapter 13 - Battle (3)

Three ten-man troops advanced towards the base, each led by a knight. The archers on the tower were prepared, their hands steady on their tightly pulled bows. Two soldiers hit the ground the moment they let go, greatly injured. The sheer speed of the arrows left the three knights surprised.

“Should I send in more soldiers, or should we let them stay?” a knight asked Menta.

Menta shook his head, “There’s no need for that. Those techniques will drain them completely with twenty arrows or so. Also, they only have two archers, how fast can they shoot? Have the troops speed up!”

Without any need for further urging, the knights leading the teams sped up as they charged towards the gate like a flood to a dam. The base didn’t have particularly tall walls, at least not too tall for them to climb over. If not for special materials in the middle of that thick wooden gate, it wouldn’t have been able to withstand their attacks either. They only had to be wary of the suppressing spells Richard would launch.

The leading soldiers actually had a savage task. Their purpose was to exhaust Richard’s mana, stripping the enemy of their long-range firepower to ease up the battle. From their interactions so far, they had determined that the enemy mage was around level 7 or 8. He could probably cast two more fireballs at most. It would be up to the God of Valour to determine who would live through them.

Seeing the frontlines charging into the mage’s range, Menta issued another command, “Troops four and five, raise your shields. Your target is the towers, charge!”

Two more knights moved out, leading their companies as they split off from the main army to charge towards the towers. The

archers had no choice but to switch targets, and as he'd anticipated Menta saw a giant fireball fly down from the main gates. Tumultuous fires swallowed an entire troop of soldiers, covering two knights as well.

Richard began reciting incantations in the midst of that raging fire, launching another fireball but three seconds later. This spell landed in nearly the same location as its predecessor, stacking with the older flames to take out all the staggered enemies on the floor.

Mages with no inhibitions about the spells they were casting were like portable meat grinders on the battlefield. Both the knights were left wounded, one more severely than the other, and the entire ten or so soldiers of that company had been wiped out as well!

Whoosh! A few sharp arrows flew in Richard's direction. The opposing archers' eyes had gone red with immense concentration, and they had all used their greatest skills. This was despite knowing that arrows not supported by magic were useless at such a great distance. Surely enough, the infantry around Richard formed a shield wall between him and the arrows, leaving them to bounce off harmlessly.

More soldiers appeared on the city walls, while Richard left under the cover of the shields. His retreat signified that the battle was finally about to begin!

Menta had finally gotten the opportunity he oh so desired, so he waved his hand forward as he bellowed, "Teams 6 to 10, follow me! Advance together! Hubert, you're second in command. Lead teams 10 to 15. Everyone else is to await further orders!"

Ten knights shouted their war cries, charging forth under Menta's lead. The arrows of the few enemy archers couldn't stop the waves of soldiers, with the two titled knights and ten novices leading the charge.

Menta lead the charge up the base's walls, leaping up and

punching a hole into them to hold onto. He used the momentum of this punch, vaulting himself over to the other side.

However, a battleaxe suddenly showed itself, heading straight in his way. Menta let out a growl in mid-air, twirling his sword with both hands as he defended himself from the attack. The iron weapons collided like thunder, the tall brute that seemed even stronger than Menta himself sent retreating with blood oozing out of the corners of his mouth. But Menta's plan to scale the walls was obstructed as well, causing him to start cursing as he was flung back by the impact. He fell heavily to the ground.

Falling from four metres high was surely hard for Menta to bear. He struggled for a few moments to get back on his feet once again. Unfortunately, the two soldiers he'd fallen down upon had died to the impact.

That small episode didn't deter the stream of soldiers from climbing up the city walls one after the other. A novice knight had already made his way up, alongside a few other warriors. Archeron soldiers rushed out of the arrow towers, shield in one hand with hatchet in the other. They viciously rushed forth towards the enemy infantry—melee may have been the soldiers' strength, but it was even more so for these Archeron elites. Even knights couldn't compare to them at the same level, forget the ordinary warriors who were still making their way up the base walls. Two of the Archerons had used their extraordinary might to cripple the enemy morale. They chopped off one of the knight's limbs, sending him hurtling down the walls as he howled in pain. Numerous corpses were sent right behind.

"Retreat!" Menta's roaring voice sounded once more. The soldiers began to back off in the midst of all the chaos, with the intruders on top of the walls seemingly having no intent to pursue. The archers at Menta's side shot two more volleys before falling back as well, while the Archerons retreated to the arrow towers once more.

A single charge had left Menta with more than twenty losses, and three novice knights heavily wounded. It also left his entire army devoid of morale, while the young priest busied himself trying to treat the less-injured knights with his limited skill. The youth did not seem well-versed as a cleric, with nearly no visible effects from his spells other than stopping the bleeding.

As the warriors rested, Menta looked at the nearby base and smiled bitterly, “They only had six fellows at the level of novice knights, and a feminine archer. That seems to be it. The mage seems to be only level 8, and he’s exhausted his mana. That’s why he’s choosing to rest— mages can take days to recover.”

Hubert nodded his head, speaking with his normal dark tone, “The next attack should be able to take them down. However, it shouldn’t have been a problem for Kojo to subdue them if they were so weak. Where did he go?”

“Who cares? Can we focus on cleaning up his mess?” Menta grew irritable at the very mention of Kojo. He extended his hand towards the base, remarking harshly, “In any case, this is the place the oracle mentioned. Conquering it is our biggest priority. Of course, it would be a splending touch if we could find Kojo’s corpse in one of the cells!”

Hubert shrugged his shoulders, showing no intent to continue the topic.

Menta shot out a mouthful of spit, cursing Kojo’s unknown location once more. Turning back to look at his exhausted soldiers and the drained priest on the ground, he roared loudly, “All of you, attention! NOW! Soldiers, prepare to attack! Let’s take down these intruders in one go!”

The resting soldiers immediately assembled into formations. Menta explained to Hubert, “We still have eleven knights who can battle, minus the two who’ll need to take care of the priest and make other preparations. Take four and twenty elites, and bring

them around to flank. The terrain there surely won't be a problem. I'll take the rest, curbing their main force. Of course, I don't mind taking out everyone on those walls. Go!"

Hubert instantly called out to four knights and some elites, detouring towards the side of the base. Menta and the remaining knights raised their shields, bringing their troops in a concentrated formation as they took sturdy steps towards the base in preparation of an attack.

Gangdor and the rest got on top of the walls once more, with Olar taking up a good vantage point. However, the archer did not pose much of a threat to this shield wall. And even if Olar could take an enemy down with every arrow he shot, the number he killed would still be counted on his fingers by the time they'd charged to the base of the walls.

Standing at the highest point, the soldiers also saw the troops Sir Hubert had brought along to flank them with, only able to send two warriors to hold them back.

Book 2, Chapter 14 - Stalemate

Menta had already switched to a morningstar, laughing sinisterly as the enemies divided their forces. He suddenly charged forward, getting to the bottom of the walls in the blink of an eye and leaping up. He made use of sheer momentum, running up and actually jumping higher than the wall itself. An enraged howl sounded as his weapon smashed down on a footsoldier's head.

CLANG! The heavy shield in the soldier's hand sunk in, and he took two steps backwards. He was left unable to control his body, falling down from the walls.

Gangdor suddenly came in from the side, his battleaxe slashing at Menta's calf. The angle of attack was incredibly tricky to deal with, and in mid-air Menta would have trouble dealing with this no matter what. He did his best to twist his body, using his shield to block the attack, but he was pushed away from the wall and lost his balance, landing heavily on the ground. Even with his ability, falling down from such a height with armour on was harsh.

However, the attack had opened up a gap in the invaders' line of defence. The novice knights made use of this opportunity to charge up the wall, and while two were sent flying back the rest gained a foothold. Veteran troops surged up the wall as well, grabbing onto its edges with but a single leap, flipping over it without trouble.

The two warriors taking the side soon lost position as well, and Hubert rushed up the wall as well. He didn't pressure them, however, instead jumping off the wall with his troops and charging into the base. There was a far more valuable target within — the mage without any more mana.

The base was about as large as a village with a hundred people. The ten-odd buildings of various sizes seemed to be arranged very messily, and even the roads were curved and twisted with not a single level path. However, the place was large and the terrain not

very complicated.

Hubert chose the largest three-storey building, kicking down the door and charging straight in. His luck appeared to be tremendous — the mage was on the first floor! Besides the young mage, there was also a strange but beautiful young woman standing in the hall. She had what seemed like a huge book in her hand, currently flipping a page open.

Hubert brandished his longsword, yelling, “Give up, invader! Follow me to the altar of the God of Valour, and repent for your sins! You might just extend your vile lives!”

However, Hubert saw Richard suddenly stretching his hands out, the soft muttering from before ringing louder. He was stupefied—this was the sound of an incantation!

They’d been prudent, noting down the types and levels of the spells the invader had cast— fireballs and Icicle Storm... These spells made it obvious that he was level 8 or 9; how could he still have the ability to cast?

Hubert’s first thought was that this was a trick, and the enemy was stalling for time to escape. However, the moment Richard’s hand started to emit a chilling wind, he felt his anxious heart fall. He cared no longer about the great merit of catching a live sacrifice, instead waving his sword and swinging it down towards Richard’s head.

Flowsand suddenly spat out a word nobody could understand, and the golden pattern between her brows flashed. Hubert’s figure began to blur and distort.

Lens of Time!

In Hubert’s eyes, everything started moving so fast it was unthinkable. This included Richard, Flowsand, and that white-clothed young girl who’d suddenly appeared above him. That longsword in her hands smelled strongly of death, forcing him to

abandon his target and use his sword to block the girl's own.

The power behind that dim sword wasn't all that great, to the point that even without a particular gift of strength Hubert felt like it was weak. However, it left a crack on his own weapon's edge, which meant the difference in quality between the two weapons was vast. The girl's movements were fast as lightning, and with the attack failed she'd already used the momentum to dart away. She landed in a corner of the room, crouching down like a wolf ready to deal a fatal strike at any moment.

Hubert steeled himself, preparing to fight back, but the girl was so quick that his heart started to thump wildly. That incredible sword, her speed, and the narrow space... He suddenly felt like retreating.

But then he felt a sudden wave of cold, followed by a powerful impact that sent jolts of pain through his body. Numerous icicles pinned his body down, even more flying past him to stop the two soldiers who wanted to charge in and support him. Hubert staggered forward, but in that short moment his entire back and shoulders were instantly covered by a frost that then extended to his chest.

Hubert was utterly appalled. He'd been distracted by the threat of that white-clothed girl, and utterly forgotten about the mage! Alas, there was no point remembering now— Richard's quick spell had left him with no time to adapt to the situation.

Hubert still felt his rate of gathering energy having slowed considerably. Breaking out of the icy restraints would already be tedious, but the girl in the corner had already pounced towards him with sword in hand!

Hubert did his best to raise his sword to defend himself, but he could only stare helplessly as the opponent's weapon pierced his chest and abdomen. In that moment, with the added enchantments of sharpness and armour penetration, the Shepherd

of Eternal Rest had burrowed through his energy barrier, making a hole through the breastplate to dig deep into Hubert's abdomen. Its tip had even pierced through, appearing behind his lower back! Lacerations were left all over his body as the girl pulled the blade out, leaving him with a terrifying injury.

Retrieving the sword from his stomach, the barefooted Waterflower retreated quickly. Landing at the corner of the room in a flash. Thump! Shards of ice flew everywhere as Hubert finally broke out of his restraints, but his blazing energy could no longer seal the wound. Waterflower's attack had practically cut through his waist, and he was left unable to stand tall. He collapsed, blood and innards rushing out of his body.

It was then that the golden light around Hubert dissipated, and that he realised it wasn't them moving fast. He had been slow.

Richard's Icicle Storm spell finally came to a stop, passing through the door and freezing a novice knight and three soldiers who were desperate to enter in their tracks. Seeing Hubert surrounded and killed by Richard and Waterflower in only a few seconds, the knight was already terrified. He went all out, speeding up his energy as he struggled free of his restraints. He managed to roll out of the path of a fireball heading his way.

Waves of fire swept through everything once more. It wasn't just the three frozen soldiers at the door—the conflagration swallowed a few of Hubert's soldiers who's been rushing over as well. These ordinary warriors could not take on the full impact of the spell, beginning to collapse and roll on the ground as they began to go up in flames. Pitiful howls resounded in the area.

Ahead of the base was complete chaos. The wall had already lost all function, with Gangdor and the footsoldiers having withdrawn to fight within the base. They split into teams and moved from building to building, using their familiarity with the terrain to their advantage.

Book 2, Chapter 15 - Stalemate (2)

Menta's thundering roar echoed throughout the base, the whizzing of his morningstar through the air so sharp it made one's heart race. However, even with his advantage in level and energy, he had no way to win over Gangdor. The brute's innate strength allowed him to match Menta blow for blow, and unlike his rough appearance he was extremely slick. He made great use of the narrow roads between the buildings; the restrictions to Menta's morningstar were worse than that to his axe.

What enraged Menta even more was that the buildings in this base were sturdier than the typical houses. Be it the walls or the wooden doors, they were stronger than they seemed. Menta often knocked through a corner with a swing of his weapon, but it would get caught on walls and the chain would rebound, bringing shattered bricks back his way.

After a blind flurry of attacks without regard for his stamina and energy, Menta eventually caught Gangdor in a strike. His wild strength cracked his opponent's axe, the spikes of the morningstar leaving deep wounds on Gangdor's chest. However, Gangdor did not even groan because of the damage. His hand still held tight to his axe, as if nothing had happened to him.

Getting hurt was normal in the Archeron death camps. Anyone who could survive that hell was abnormal, able to completely ignore pain. Menta's breathing grew heavier, but Gangdor seemed to be undead as he stood back up regardless of the toughness of his injuries. It was as though he could be injured but not killed, his energy still going strong as if he had no limits to his strength. Menta had determined at the start that Gangdor was only level 10, but even with a three level difference their fight was this close. He couldn't help but rage.

Behind Gangdor was another knight, shield in one hand and axe in the other. He guarded the brute's back, leaving the opponent

knights charging them down with no way to attack. He kept Gangdor's back and side protected.

These level 10 knights that Gaton had dispatched weren't particularly talented, but they were all experienced at war. They were like rocks in the middle of battle, unmoving and undefeatable.

Menta had grown so enraged at this point that he was preparing to end Gangdor in one blow. However, a faint voice sounded out at that moment, faint light flashing across Gangdor's body even as a song was sung. The exhausted giant regained lucidity immediately, his strength even seeming to grow as he once more blocked off Menta's numerous full-power blows.

"Damn it! VERMIN!" Menta cursed in fury. Gangdor had regained his strength from the song of the elven bard. In this plane bards weren't only about their arts—most of them sold their bodies. They were basically the same as female dancers.

However, it was this 'cheap' class that disrupted this battle greatly. Olar was extremely agile, moving back and forth between the buildings freely as though he was in the forest. He chose the occasional opportunity to jump up on a roof, quickly shooting down some unlucky warriors before he fled to somewhere safe before he was encircled. Every draw of his bow let loose an arrow at an opponent's vitals, all without much time taken to aim. Those shot were either immobilised, or outright killed.

At his level, Olar could bless three people with the power of his battle song. Gangdor and two other knights radiated energy immediately, lengthening the battle once more.

Gangdor retreated without end, while Menta advanced. By the time the former backed out of the narrow alley to stand at a crossroad, a ray of sacred light shone down on him. The wound marks on his chest stopped bleeding immediately, as the flesh wriggled at a speed visible to the naked eye. The wounds slowly

closed up.

“Greater heal!” Menta roared hysterically. This one skill destroyed practically all of his morale. Who was this priest? The spell was even more powerful than the older priest they had brought along, and he had been level 10!

The rarest type of intruder was a priest. Differing planar laws led to the dominion of differing deities, and a priest often lost their connection to their god— and thus their power— when they entered a new plane. Replenishing one’s mana wouldn’t be a problem, but they would not be able to advance.

Menta scanned the surroundings, spotting the window of a building at the street corner immediately. There was the silhouette of a woman who looked like a priest behind it.

He instantly pointed to that building, shouting, “MEN! SLAUGHTER THAT WHORE!”

Two soldiers responded, breaking into the building, but a dim sword crossed them the moment they stepped within. It sliced across them, before Waterflower left the floor with the Shepherd of Eternal Rest in hand. She went up to the second floor, jumping into one of the rooms before exiting through the windows to disappear into another building. Richard and Flowsand, originally at the second floor as well, were nowhere to be seen.

Another ray of sacred light landed in the blink of an eye, stopping the bleeding of a badly injured soldier immediately. A fireball exploded not far away, taking out the enemies who were chasing him. The knight used the opportunity to duck into one of the buildings nearby. Flowsand’s spell would treat most of his injuries in a few minutes, which was enough time for him to regain some energy as well.

The third, the fourth, and the fifth... Even more rays of sacred light flashed across the battlefield, each one only fuelling Menta’s flaming rage. His victory had been reversed, just like that, and

none of the enemies had been killed yet. Every ray falling down tipped the scales of the battle a little, and this didn't even count that mage! He'd already cast five fireballs and two icicle storms—was his power neverending just like that priest's?

Menta felt like attacking that hateful priest himself, but Gangdor who was standing before him held on tightly, giving him no room to escape. The smell of blood in the base grew stronger and stronger, but most of it was from Menta's troops.

“HUBERT! Where did that scoundrel go? HUBERT! KILL THAT WHORE!” Menta's roar covered the base once again, but the reply he received this time was actually a strange mournful shriek!

His heart skipped a beat, an indescribable hurriedness suddenly filling his mind. He recognised the scream to be from a subordinate, but these warriors had all seen blood and death before, most even fighting those of other races. Even dying in battle they should not have been screaming like this! This was a scream of extreme fear.

Even the undead would not scare his warriors. These intruders seemed to be humans themselves, what was it?

The shriek had come from a small house at the corner of the base. A warrior was rolling around on the floor, trying to get a large, exotic insect off his body. It was a metre-long worm that shone black, dragging along a strangely large abdomen with six stout legs. It looked very clumsy.

The shell on the creature's back was open, and it flapped its wings from time to time. A pair of short yet sharp pincers pierced the warrior's body, the creature burrowing into him. The panic-stricken warrior could only try and hit the bug with his hands—his weapons were long lost.

Another warrior rushed over to the scene, taking a breath of cold air at the frightening sight. He froze for a few seconds, before charging forward with a roar, his sword held in hand. That roar

was not to threaten the enemy— it was meant to give him courage.

This was the broodmother that had hatched from the Eternal Dragon's 'seed.' It had grown severalfold in a single day of foraging, from the size of a kitten to the metre-long beast that it was now. Seeing a new enemy, it pulled its head out of the previous warrior's body, fixing its eyes upon the charging prey.

The warrior lying on the ground then started to feel an unbearable pain. He looked down, only to see the armour, skin, flesh, and even bone at his waist all gone. The resulting scream did not even sound human, and he collapsed with his eyes rolled up.

The broodmother's shell opened up once again, and it swayed as it flew up and pounced at the opposing warrior. Its movement was comical, as if it was difficult for it to maintain balance.

Hearing his comrade's scream, the man felt goosebumps rising on his body. He roared again, the longsword in his hand slashing down like a howling wind as he attacked the creature's head and back thrice. Attacked in mid-air, the creature fell to the ground with a thud. The sword's hits on its shell had done nothing, only leaving a clang of metals colliding behind. The level 5 elite's three powerful strikes had only left scars on the shell, not making their way through.

The broodmother's mouth suddenly moved, and it let loose a mental attack on the warrior. The veteran of battle only felt like there were tens of sharp needles piercing into his brain, taking his vision away as he lost his balance and fell. The broodmother pounced on him immediately, clinging firmly to his head with its six legs as it pierced through his back with its pincers.

Richard's silhouette appeared at the door of the house. Seeing the two warriors defeated, he quickly moved onto the next battlefield. Flowsand followed closely, peeking into the room as well. Her pupils shrunk at the sight of the broodmother, but she hurried behind Richard without saying a word.

Book 2, Chapter 16 - Counterattack

Flowsand suddenly came to a stop after passing a crossroad, flipping through the Book of Time quickly. A stream of divine power rushed forth from the pages, forming a healing spell that landed on Gandor who was about ten metres away. His laughter echoed through the base, even as Menta roared in fury.

Richard looked up, finding Olar on top of a roof at the corner of the street, pointing in a certain direction. He immediately brought Flowsand along, running in that direction. A blood-soaked knight soon appeared at the end of the alley, seeing their backs and laughing sinisterly as he chased after them with large strides.

However, Waterflower silently appeared atop a roof at the end of the alley, jumping down wordlessly behind the knight as if she was a ghost. She moved in short strides, taking fast and nimble steps as she neared him quickly. The Shepherd of Eternal Rest darted across his body, sending his head flying into the sky even as the body continued to forge ahead. By the time it crashed down, not even a shadow of the assassin remained.

Richard seemed like he was dashing around the base aimlessly, but every so often he appeared at critical locations of the battle. Flowsand's holy spells healed the injured Archerons, restoring them to fighting form. Being connected to Waterflower and the broodmother, Richard could tell their locations clearly, and although it was more vague and limited with the others he could sense the rest of his team through the contracts as well. Thus, though the battle within the base seemed to be beyond chaotic, that was only true for Menta's troops. Hubert had already died to Flowsand's Lens of Time, and the rest who were experienced with sieges were left fighting for themselves.

Richard had taken control of the situation, the team of him, Waterflower, and Flowsand lurking all over the battlefield and supporting those who were in crises. They used magic to massacre

regular warriors, offering themselves up as bait to lure novice knights into a chase before ambushing them. The battle continued to tip in their favour bit by bit, Menta's troops being eroded away.

The thing Richard was most worried about was the broodmother; not because it was small and weak, but because of an indescribable feeling he had. He really couldn't predict this creature's actions like he could with the rest, only convincing himself that a gift from the Eternal Dragon would not harm its worshippers.

Richard turned to look at the broodmother, and the creature stood quietly by the side of a defeated warrior as it flapped its wings to show that it was well. However, the moment he looked away it buried itself into the prey. Flowsand had come right behind, seeing everything clearly, but chose not to say anything.

Exceedingly horrifying cries resonated from a corner of the base, though they gave way to silence very quickly. Nearly everyone felt a shiver down their spine, leaving even Menta's knights subconsciously keeping their distance from that area. The broodmother moved out of a small house a few minutes later, making its way for the headless corpse of a knight at the end of the road with all its strength. It used its sharp claws to drag the body into a house by the side.

By the time the creature emerged from the house once more, its body seemed to have doubled in size. The broodmother's abdomen was so swollen by this point that it was almost a sphere, and no matter how hard it flapped its short wings it only hovered not a metre off the ground.

At that moment, a warrior happened to turn the corner. Seeing a black object floating under his nose, he let out a frightened scream as he hacked at it with his sword. However, the broodmother had already spotted him with its compound eyes, dashing towards him in a flash. Before the warrior could even lift his arms up completely, he was bleeding from his nose and ears, falling without a sound. The broodmother dropped to the ground as well,

climbing onto him with some difficulty before it dragged him to another of the houses nearby.

Richard and the broodmother were each aware of the other's location. Be it intentional or otherwise, every time the broodmother ate it was quite a distance away from him, in some remote area.

Putting yet another warrior down, Richard finally stopped to catch his breath. Even with the doubled support of both his vitality rune and Flowsand's blessings, he was nearly depleted of both mana and energy. The battle had reached its limits as well—Menta's howls could no longer be heard in the base, giving way to coarse gasps for breath. Gangdor didn't have the strength remaining to talk about his axe anymore.

It was time!

Richard sent out orders to two faint points within his consciousness. Although the troll brothers only sensed indistinct trembles in their own souls, they understood the signal. It was time to launch their attack.

The dozen-odd warriors guarding the priest and the injured outside the base suddenly felt the earth beneath them tremble ever so slightly. The leaves on the trees started to shake, as the earth began to let out an intense rumble. They looked around in fright, suddenly seeing two enormous boulders flying out of the forest!

Piercing winds howled as the boulders smashed down right in the middle of their formation, bouncing a few more times as they smashed an unlucky fellow to pulp and severely injured three others. Everything had happened so abruptly that nobody had a chance to react.

Whoosh! A fireball came flying out of the forest, a standard example of its kind. The power, cast time, and mana consumption were all average, but this spell finally proved that Tiramisu was a true mage. The blaze left half the warriors collapsed, even if the

young priest was able to escape quick enough to only be lightly injured.

The tremors in the ground grew even more powerful, as Medium Rare's huge shadow surged forward. He charged towards the disorderly warriors with unparalleled power, and this time he wasn't completely naked. The troll was garbed in thick steel armour, with a helmet like a spiked steel ball on his head with leather-padded steel boots on his feet.

The armour had no enchantments whatsoever, the mere weight and strength of the steel being sufficient to leave his enemies in a state of despair. Hundreds of kilograms weighing one down would leave a human warrior with difficulty moving, but Medium Rare's movements were barely even affected. The troll was so strong that he even had a hammer in each of his hands, a single one weighing just as much as the armour itself.

Even on Norland fully grown trolls forced ordinary adventurers to retreat. On a secondary plane like this, they were frightening monsters that only the best of elites even tried to challenge. What, then, if such a monster had weapons and armour?

Medium Rare was almost like a mobile fortress, pouncing onto the remaining survivors ferociously. But perhaps the opposing warriors weren't already dejected enough— two brilliant rays of mana shone on the troll's body, the second immediately turning him ash-brown from head to toe. The severely injured knights had originally armed themselves with shields, ready to resist, but those rays of magic caused them to cry out in despair.

If there was anything that was more frightening than an armoured, weapon-wielding troll, that was Rare right now. He'd been buffed by Bull's Strength and Iron Skin. His giant hammer smashed into a heavy shield with a suppressed thud, sending the warrior flying in the air. The man's body twisted in mid-air, distorting just like his shield had into an unnatural form.

“Leave me two of them!” Tiramisu bellowed through the forest. He dashed, holding a hammer just like Rare’s in hand, but with only leather armour on his body. The mage shared his brother’s love for hammers as a troll, but being a mage he couldn’t wear suits of metal.

By the time Tiramisu rushed to the battlefield, Rare had already crushed all of the enemies. He’d also lightly tapped the young priest with the hammer in his hand, leaving him with a minor swelling on the back of his head. Attacking so gently with a hundred kilograms in hand was something he was proud of.

“YOU KILLED THEM ALL!” Tiramisu roared in accusation, but Medium Rare was already charging towards the base in big strides. “The battle there hasn’t ended yet, Master is summoning us!”

Tiramisu hurried towards the base as well, but even without any heavy armour on he could not catch up to his brother. The distance between them continued to increase.

“Damn it!” he howled in futility. He began to consider casting a slowing spell on his brother; after all, he was a mage.

Book 2, Chapter 17 - A Brave Warrior

Once the two powerful trolls joined in, the barely sustained stalemate was finally broken. The fatigued soldiers and knights were unable to withstand their magic-enhanced blows.

One knight collided head-on with Medium Rare, staggering backwards with a loud crash. His left arm was deformed by the impact, dangling from the side of his body with his dented shield.

Medium Rare exploded into a violent rage. He'd hammered with all his might, but he hadn't been able to knock this feeble enemy aside. He roared wildly, whirling his heavy hammers again to send the knight flying into the distance like a puppet with its strings cut. He then straightened himself, thumping his own chest as he roared thunderously, "Damned pieces of steak, who still wants to fight?!"

Nobody responded to the troll's warcry. He hadn't had a language proficiency spell cast on himself, so to them his roars were meaningless voices. Of course, the same could be said the other way.

As Rare roared to his heart's content, Tiramisu rapidly overtook him. He brandished his own hammer, ruthlessly smashing a warrior into the ground. His brother roared in rage, chasing after him at once.

A moment later, Menta and his surviving soldiers were surrounded at an open space at the corner of the base. Menta's helmet was nowhere to be seen, sweaty hair sticking to his forehead.

The morningstar seemed to grow heavier by the minute, so much so that it had grown difficult to hold it up. Every single muscle of Menta's body was aching. A crack had formed on the shield in his left hand, with its edged being a little deformed.

Menta looked behind himself. There were only two knights left, soaked in blood all over, as well as ten or so warriors who were all injured as well. On the opposing side was Gangdor and seven Archeron soldiers, as well as the two formidable trolls. The elven bard was crouched atop a roof, his hands trembling with fatigue as he held onto his bow and arrow. However, even then that damned warsong didn't stop coming from his lips.

His gaze finally fell on Richard, Waterflower, and Flowsand. The cleric seemed not to notice his animalistic gaze, instead flipping through the Book of Time as she cast one spell after another on their own front lines, including Gangdor and the knights. Although these were only minor spells this time, they provoked Menta so much he almost went insane.

It was this woman! Her divine power seemed endless, rescuing his enemies one after the other from the brink of death and bringing them back into the battlefield. When the battle first unfolded, the original two knights who hadn't yet recovered from their serious injuries had only been capable of self-defence. However, with how weary and injured his army was, even they had become a force to be reckoned with.

Richard stuck the nameless sword Gaton had given him into the ground, taking a step forward as he spoke to Menta, "Surrender, Sir Menta. There is no need for more futile sacrifices."

Menta laughed out loud, before retorting menacingly, "Surrender? What can you even offer me?"

"Vowing loyalty to me would certainly be the best choice, but if not you will become a prisoner of war. I will have Baron Forza pay a ransom for you, giving me a piece of your land."

"In your dreams!" Menta snarled, tightening his grip on his weapon, "Those who worship the God of Valour never cave in to intruders! You will pillage, slaughter and destroy! No one will cooperate with you!"

Richard smiled, “As far as I know, the God of Valour is not the only deity here. There a lot of others, some of whom are his enemies. Besides, not everyone here is religious. I can always find someone who’s willing to work for me. You aren’t as valuable as you think you are.”

Menta spat harshly on the ground, sneering, “My value lies in dignity and conviction. You son of a bitch, do you dare duel me? Even without any energy I can beat your ass to the ground!”

The corner of Richard’s eye twitched violently the moment he heard the expletive thrown at him. He took two steps back calmly, holding the sword buried into the ground in a backhand grip.

Menta squinted his eyes, subconsciously cowering a little as if he’d seen a dangerous beast. Although he was baffled by the mage holding an outrageously long and slender sword, deep down he was pleasantly surprised. This young magician was clearly the chief of the intruders. If he could capture him, it was likely that he would be able to get his men out of this predicament.

Flowsand and Waterflower huddled towards Richard, while Gangdor turned around and held his axe at the ready so he could intercept Menta instantly. The battlefield suddenly fell silent, with the exception of some rustling from a corner.

Richard extended his hand towards Gangdor, “Gangdor, wine!”

Gangdor was stumped for a moment, but he only mumbled a bit before retrieving the small silver flask attached to his waist. He twisted the lid off, handing the flask over to Richard. Richard didn’t take a second look, raising his head and gulping all the hard liquor down in a few mouthfuls.

“Master, poison!” Waterflower reminded stiffly.

“Waterflower! You...” Gangdor turned to glare at Waterflower, but the girl didn’t relent as she glared back in turn. She intentionally raised her sword a little higher, weakening the

brute's ire significantly in an instant.

Richard's face quickly reddened with the alcohol entering his system, his eyes brightening like the dark sky at night. He returned the empty wine jug to Gangdor, while his grip on the sword gradually loosened finger by finger.

Richard looked up at the sky, letting out a breath that reeked of alcohol before turning to Menta once more, "This is a planar war, not a living room of a noble. You don't get to ask for a duel. Charge, all of you! Finish him!"

Menta roared, beginning to charge in his own attack, but he immediately met a firm line of defence. Gangdor and the trolls intercepted him successfully, moving with agility not matching their enormous frames.

In extreme despair, the knight burst forth with astonishing strength. The morningstar's force grew earth-shattering, forcing Gangdor and the trolls to retreat continuously. However, a dull yellow light shone on Menta and instantly slowed him down for more than a second. The troll magician quickly raised his hammer, dealing the knight a heavy blow on the back. Two relatively unscathed Archeron knights took up two more positions, the five encircling and trapping their target.

"Those who do not wish to die, drop your weapons. Face the wall, and stand still." Richard said coldly, pointing the surviving soldiers to a corner of the wall.

One novice knight stared blankly at Sir Menta's direction, barely able to see his figure behind the veil of dust. He hesitated for a moment, before dropping his weapons and slowly turning to stand facing the wall. At the same time, he raised his hands up high. With a precedent, the other soldiers did not hesitate any longer as well. They dropped their weapons one by one, and gave up resisting.

Menta's roars grew softer and softer. By the time his tall, sturdy

figure finally collapsed, he had innumerable injuries all over his body. Everyone fighting him, be it Gangdor, the trolls, or the knights, had sustained great injuries as well. This was a warrior who fought like a lion, never giving up no matter how desperate it was.

Richard walked over to the side of Menta's dead body and squatted down, extending his hand to touch the blood flowing out of the knight. It was still boiling hot.

He sighed, standing up before saying, "This was a respectable enemy, bury him well. Have his equipment accompany him in his eternal rest."

Book 2, Chapter 18 - Growing Up

Everything in the base was a complete mess. A lucky soldier who'd managed to escape stealthily was hidden in a corner, attempting to flee by climbing a wall. However, he felt something at the front door of a nearby house. He took a peek in, and his expression instantly turned to one of horror. He parted his lips in a scream.

However, that scream never came. The soldier's body shuddered, and his expression stilled. Streams of blood spurted out of his ears, even as a puddle of murky green liquid flowed out from under the door and squirted into his mouth.

The liquid was extremely corrosive, stifling the soldier's scream as large amounts of gas erupted from his mouth. There was no chance for him to call for help as he fell head first to the ground, facing the sky. Both his hands were grasping at his throat in a desperate struggle, but two sharp blades flashed from within the room, biting into his calf and dragging him into the house.

The broodmother's soul had grown exceptionally in a short period of time, and it had gained the ability to spew acid.

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The surrendered soldiers were detained in the cellar of the pub, bandaged and given a modicum of treatment. The two novice knight, more seriously injured than the rest, had lesser heals cast on them as well. This relaxed the prisoners; the priestess would not be willing to waste her precious holy spells on them if they were going to be slaughtered.

Two knights followed Tiramisu to the outside of the base, picking up two more prisoners that were rather valuable— a knight who'd been immobilised by his injuries and the fainted priest. The rest were up to their own tasks; cleaning up the base, collecting the spoils of war, or searching for hidden enemies.

A handful of opposing soldiers had escaped at the very last minute of the battle, but Olar was already chasing them down. It would be impossible for him to capture all of the escapees alone, but he was also the only one of them with the energy left to pursue while observing the situation.

The battle had finally ended, and weirdly enough Richard's entire party had come out of it scot-free; a beyond miraculous situation. Of course, the biggest miracle was Flowsand. Her Lens of Time had allowed them to kill Hubert off instantly, and during the stalemate she'd used seven greater heals, twelve normal heals, and a whopping thirty lesser heal spells in total. This was like giving every individual in their troop half a life. Flowsand alone had been as useful as a group of clerics, the Book of Time of course playing as important a part in that as her talent did. Nearly a third of the spells she'd cast had been stored within the book before.

Richard, Gandor, and Waterflower had made equally significant contributions to the battle. Gandor had maintained a stranglehold on Menta until he died, while Richard had killed a substantial number of normal warriors. He easily had the most heads to his name of anyone here, with even Waterflower only having a dozen odd kills. Of course, five of her kills were knights, with the others being elite veterans.

Moving on, Richard calculated that the next biggest contributor was actually the elven bard. His warsong could support three people, effectively boosting them from level 10 to 11 in terms of ability. While that didn't seem like much, the results of his voice echoing throughout the battlefield spoke for themselves. He himself had ten kills of his own; the smart elf had intentionally avoided fighting knights, targeting injured warriors and taking them out with a single shot for each one.

All of the seven knights had survived, their willpower and rich experience definitely helping in the pivotal situation. A veteran like that was far better in an actual battle than any young genius.

Only now did Richard understand why Gaton had used up ten teleportation slots for them.

Numbers aside, Richard had actually made more contributions than one could see on the surface. His soul contracts allowed him to know the locations of more than half the enemies, as well as the overall tides of the battle. He'd constantly made it to the most crucial areas at critical times. On top of that, he'd set up the ambush with the two trolls outside right from the start, to act as their last resort in case both sides had suffered great casualties.

Richard was currently standing in the plaza of the base, listening to his knights' reports regarding the battle. The veterans were extremely proficient in these administrative affairs both before and after battle, doing it out of their own will without Richard's requests or reminders. Such a thing made people like Gangdor, the elf, and the trolls who only knew to kill pale in comparison.

However, he was sensitive to numbers and something felt off. The sum of escapees and corpses fell short of the numbers of the army that had attacked them. Of course he didn't know everything on the battlefield like the back of his hand, but a difference like this was hard to ignore.

He tried to remember, but he eventually came to the conclusion that the missing warriors were neither hidden in the base nor escaped, they'd likely died. So the real issue was this—where were the bodies? The battle had just ended, so the base couldn't have any enemy presence.

As he was immersed in thought, Richard suddenly felt waves of pain assault his mind. Fragmented noises sounded in his ears, but amidst the splitting headache he thought they were just background sound. However, these noises grew clearer and clearer as time passed, becoming extremely eerie.

Richard shot up, nimbly picking up the sword on the ground as he signalled for Flowsand, Waterflower, and Gangdor to come

after him. He followed the direction of the noises in his consciousness, coming to a secluded corner of the base. The noises sounded exceptionally clear here, coming from the ground floor of this two-storey building.

“Broodmother?” Richard called out. He could feel its presence right here within his mind.

The creature’s reply immediately rang out in his head, “I am here, master. It is safe, you may enter.”

The words had been spoken quite fluently. The creature had been true to its words, learning Norland’s tongue in a mere day.

Richard remained suspicious, leading the small party through the door. However, he was shocked by the sight the moment he step foot into the building!

This floor had originally been a living room, but now everything was in complete disarray. All that was left of the furniture was a pile of rags, leaving a huge empty space at the centre of the room where the broodmother was crouched. Its head was down, continuing to chew on broken armour, shields, and weapons. These were the noises that Richard had heard in his mind.

Everyone here was shocked by the broodmother’s current appearance, even Richard himself. The creature was currently two metres long, being a metre tall and wide as well. Before the battle it was less than half this size!

Gangdor and Waterflower had already assumed battle positions subconsciously, the large broodmother radiating an intense feeling of danger. Even though they’d already seen it before, and they knew that it was a contract creature, it was almost impossible for them to draw connections between that rather large insect and this monster before them.

“What’s going on?” Richard asked in shock.

“These metals can strengthen and harden my armour.

Everything I chose was scrap, there was no way to reuse it.”

Richard was shocked once more, but this time at the creature’s intelligence. It was barely a day old, but it was already familiar with the concept of value. Even as he talked to it through their soul link, it didn’t stop eating once throughout the conversation. The tough metal was easily crushed in its mouth before it swallowed, drool dripping onto the armour and weapons every now and then as it sizzled a hole into the alchemic metals.

Gangdor and Waterflower grew more alert at the sight. The battle might of the broodmother was still unknown, but if one came into contact with its saliva... the consequences were obvious.

Book 2, Chapter 19 - Growing Up (2)

The broodmother's abdomen had devolved into a big round ball, out of proportion with the rest of its body. The creature's shell was almost bursting apart, a few transparent wings popping out of the cracks. The mere size of the broodmother had already ensured that these wings were mere decorations now.

The broodmother stopped in its tracks, its abdomen expanding quickly as a cracking sound emanated from its body. Fissures started to appear all over its dark black shell, widening as they leaked a yellow liquid. The liquid vapourised as soon as it came in contact with air, soon forming a black mass.

Everybody, Richard included, was bewildered by the creature in front of them. It had literally doubled in size once more just now! They also felt a sudden sting in their eyes, tears rolling down without control even as their skins started burning. Although most of the gas had solidified, whatever did remain seemed to be very corrosive.

The broodmother spoke again, "I produce a large amount of acidic gas when I grow, Master. Please leave for now."

Richard led his team out of the building immediately, but the thick gas still rolled out in waves. Eventually, Flowsand had to dispel the corrosive effect on everyone.

What Richard didn't see was the huge pile of bones behind the broodmother being corroded rapidly by its acidic fluids. This was the source of the gas, but the creature didn't want Richard to see that. Moments later, all that was left of the bones and wreckage was a lump of black ash, with no way to tell its original form...

By the time the gas completely dissipated, the broodmother had grown once again. This time, it was half a metre wider and longer, looking even chubbier than before. It was almost impossible to tell head from tail, and while its body had grown its pincers and limbs

had not, making them seem rather out of place.

At that point, even leaving the room grew difficult due to the creature's increased size. The entrance had now grown too small for it to pass through, causing it to let out a sound of annoyance before it charged forwards and broke apart the frame to get through.

This took out half of the building's walls as well, and the ceiling collapsed on top of the creature's head. The window and balcony caved in as well, burying the broodmother underneath. It shook off the rubble, crawling out as if it was nothing.

Two knights had been alerted by the collapse, and they were shocked as soon as they saw the broodmother. They readied themselves, entering combat positions as they called for help and cordoned off the route to the rest of the camp.

However, Richard came over and stood by the broodmother's side, tapping its shell as he spoke to the two knights, "There is no need to worry. This is a broodmother, a creature contracted to my soul."

The two knights shared a look of incredulity, one of them shuddering involuntarily as he looked at the bee-like creature before saying, "Alright, Master. But... it seems like a good idea to keep your distance from the creature."

The broodmother propped itself up, waving its mandibles at the knight menacingly. Its actions seemed to take effect, as the knight jumped back into a stance. It only calmed down a little when Richard tapped its shell once more.

There were a lot of things left to do after the battle, so Richard dismissed the rest of them as he stayed behind to communicate with the broodmother. It delivered all the information it had over to him in an instant.

The creature was still in its larval stage, but it was more than half

of the way to evolution. Having observed the humans and the power system of this plane, it had enhanced its physical defences. Its shell could now take the blow of a level 10 knight without any damage, with only those on par with Menta being able to even damage it. In terms of magical defence it was almost immune to acid, poison, cold, and electricity, fire being the only major element able to hurt it.

Its ultimate offence now lay in its soul attack and the acid it could spew. The acid spray had a short range, only ten metres, but if one got hit by it even a fully armoured soldier could only resist the corrosion for a minute at most. Outside of its reduced movements and the lost ability to fly, the broodmother was actually a force to be reckoned with. And even though its oversized abdomen seemed weak, it was multilayered and made of a substance similar to its hard shell that could only be cut open by a knight with a heavy axe. The arrows of archers like Olar wouldn't be able to penetrate it.

This evaluation had come from the broodmother itself after the day's battle. Its clear and simple analysis surprised Richard, yet again reminding him of its intelligence. Its head was about as large as a regular human's, but the creature told him that it wasn't a critical component of its body. It had more than a dozen brains, most of them safely protected by the thick shell of its chest.

Still in its larval phase, the broodmother needed to consume a lot of food. Once it finished the report, it asked Richard permission to hunt.

"Will you even be able to catch prey?" Richard asked, "Or should I have Olar come along?" He was rather doubtful of the broodmother's speed, and its soul attack and acid spray were pretty limited in their range.

"I can breed drones right now. They will capture my prey, flesh and blood are the best food I can have at this stage." The broodmother seemed to be implying something, and Richard instantly remembered the hundreds of bodies in the camp. He

lowered his voice, “No humans, but other than that I’m not interested to know. Do you need anything else? I’ll try my best to get it for you.”

“The drones will be enough.”

Permission granted, the broodmother slowly crawled out of the base. It seemed rather displeased with its own speed, flapping its wings several times to no avail. It took off several times, but it always fell back within ten metres, having to crawl again.

Even aware that this was their master’s contract beast, the knights couldn’t hide their faces of shock. They’d seen many powerful beasts on the battlefield, Gaton’s own mounts were majestic creatures, but the one before them gave these veterans a feeling they’d never felt before. And it was not a good one.

Book 2, Chapter 20 - Responsibility

Cleaning up the battlefield was an arduous task. The knights dragged the corpses out of the base, collecting their armour. Richard started to question the prisoners about the geography, religion, and customs of the region. He even asked them about the idiosyncrasies of the baron, writing page after page of notes from interrogation to interrogation.

It was almost dusk by the time the place was cleaned up. Hundreds of bodies were piled up outside, while the smell of food wafted within. Flowsand awoke from her meditation, walking into the pub to see Richard still interrogating a warrior. There was a large stack of records on the table.

Despite his visible exhaustion, Richard's eyes were alert. His writing remained neat and tidy, the fatigue not affecting them at all.

She sat down next to him, saying seriously, "You need rest. A mage without mana is inferior to even a common warrior."

Richard looked up at the sky and replied, "There's only two more left, I'll eat once I'm done." He patted the stack before continuing, "This information is more important than my mana reserves. We know nothing about this plane, and have no idea what to expect. I have to draft a quick outline to aid us in our future decisions.

"A third of Forza's elites have been eliminated, with three out of his five subordinate knights losing their lives. I don't think they'll be able to attack us in the near future. They only have the manpower and resources to guard the core of their territory, so I have more than enough time to recuperate."

Richard sighed at that moment, "Tch, I just realised I made a grave mistake. We should have chased the runners down and taken Osfa. The knights' horses were there, at least a few dozen. That would've been a great advantage, a huge fortune! But now, those

guys will definitely have taken all the horses away.”

“Richard. It’s impossible to not make any mistakes at all. Your performance in this battle was on par with an outstanding general. Don’t be too hard on yourself, you’re barely sixteen.” Flowsand might look rather emotionless, but her words were laced with concern.

Richard ruffled his hair and smiled bitterly, “We’re in a plane we’re unfamiliar with, facing strong enemies we’ve never encountered before. The gods of this plane already sent an oracle down predicting our arrival, and us? We don’t even know how we got here, and have nothing outside of basic resources. Our advance troops were lost in that time rift you mentioned, and three of our veterans died the moment we stepped through the portal. We don’t even know if we can rally the locals to our aid in battle. We have no room for mistakes!”

Flowsand put her hand on Richard’s to comfort him, “You have to calm down. You can’t stress yourself like that, you are our leader. And that is not something I’m just saying. You have the greatest power amongst us, and you’re a runemaster on top. You also have the blessing of the Eternal Dragon himself. The broodmother and I are the greatest proof of that, no?”

“As for the oracle from the god of valour, it should only have predicted the position of our portal from the spacetime fluctuations it caused. It’s unlikely for him to know our next plans. If their god really was that powerful, Kojo wouldn’t have been the only one waiting for us.

“You should also remember this: if anything happens to you, none of those contracted to you will survive.”

“That seems to be a large responsibility,” Richard sighed dejectedly, but Flowsand looked him in the eye, “But it was your choice. Wasn’t it?”

Richard nodded, a smile finally returning to his sullen face. “I

know what to do now. We have enough resources for me to make a total of four runes. I'll create a mana amplification rune for you later, it's the only one that can suit you given our current ingredients."

"Alright, but I'll have to take care of the bodies first. Send two knights and ten of the prisoners with me."

Richard agreed, calling two knights over and picking ten prisoners to help Flowsand. He'd already interrogated most of them by then, and given his extraordinary memory he knew what state they were all in. He'd picked only normal warriors, and even if their injuries were light they were all quite meek in nature.

Gangdor came in just as Richard finished assigning the men to their jobs, calling out barbarically, "Master, dinner time! Anything else can be dealt with after we've eaten!"

The aroma that hit Richard's nostrils brought a near-instant hunger with it. Still, Richard managed to wait until he finished the last interrogation before walking towards a temporary kitchen with Gangdor.

The smell of food filled the entire floor. Three knights, Waterflower, and Olar were all sitting around the dinner table, each with a big bowl before them devouring everything within. Richard saw Tiramisu alone in the kitchen, stirring a pot with all his strength. It seemed like this food that everyone was in love with came from him.

Gangdor brought a bowl over for Richard as well, saying, "Master, I can't believe your trolls are such good cooks! Their meat stew is so much better than the ones at camp."

Olar scoffed at the side, "I've had my fair share of meat stew in the past, what's the big deal? Still, this one is truly well-cooked."

Olar had worked for a handful of royal families before, so he naturally had a good taste for food. For even the elf to acknowledge

it meant the food had to be good.

Just then, the troll that was busy in the kitchen shouted in Gangdor's direction, "Hey shorty! I have a name, don't call me 'troll!'"

"Ah, my bad!" Gangdor raised his arms in surrender, "Alright, Medium Rare."

But then, Medium Rare roared from the outside, "THAT'S ME! He's Tiramisu, shorty!"

The bigger troll peeked into the restaurant, glaring at Gangdor as if he was about to attack the man. Richard quickly stood up to stop things from escalating, "Alright, Gangdor didn't—"

However, when he turned to see Gangdor's sneaky face, he was forced into an awkward silence. He wanted to say Gangdor didn't mean it, but this fellow had done it on purpose!

Gangdor laughed loudly at the scene before him. "Right, I did it on purpose. I'll call you by your names, but you can't call me shorty!"

"Deal!" Tiramisu and Medium Rare echoed.

Richard shook his head and sat down, all ready to dig in. He tried a spoonful of the stew— it was indeed delicious, cooked to utter perfection. This was better than anything that the Archeron chefs had ever cooked, only slightly behind the chefs of the Deepblue itself.

"This is really good!" Richard complimented.

"Of course!" the two trolls answered proudly, "We are gourmets!"

.....

Halfway through the meal, Richard stopped abruptly. This attracted Waterflower's attention while Gangdor asked, "Are you alright, Master?"

Richard quickly reverted to his normal self. “I’m fine, eat up!” he said, continuing to finish his food.

He’d just felt a worrying decrease in the broodmother’s power, but that had gone back up just as fast so he was relieved.

Book 2, Chapter 21 - Responsibility (2)

The broodmother was laid on its stomach in the forest nearby, its shell creaking and cracking everywhere as it grew once more. Its swollen abdomen had grown relatively smaller, implying that it had already consumed most of the stored food. This growth spurt put the creature at more than three metres long, and about as tall as an adult human. However, its limbs, pincers, and head had little changes to them.

The broodmother staggered forward, leaving three translucent oval eggs behind. They started pulsing the moment they touched the ground, and one could see beings within rapidly taking form and growing. Pincers pierced through the eggshells, and half-metre-long worker drones that looked like the young broodmother crawled out. There was about ten minutes of difference between the creatures being laid and breaking out, and just like the broodmother the first thing they did upon coming out was to consume their shells. They then shook their bodies as their outer shells hardened, growing to near a metre in length by the time the process ended.

The worker drones spread their wings and flew out, soaring in a circle around the broodmother before swiftly heading into the depths of the forest. The broodmother itself lay quietly in its position, looking like a black rock under the night sky.

The weather remained pleasant, with stars littering the sky. The moonlight itself was dim, but there seemed to be a thin veil of grey shrouding the forest. The broodmother suddenly moved its body at one point, withdrawing into the shadows of the trees as it was put on guard by human voices in the distance. However, it smelt something familiar and opened up once more, laying down quietly in the forest again.

Hundreds of metres away, an open space in the forest was illuminated so brightly that it practically looked like day. Ten of

the prisoners had dug two pits, one large and one small. They moved their fallen comrades from a cart into the larger pit, supervised by two Archeron knights in full armour. The two titled knights and the novices were placed in the smaller one, obviously with preferential treatment. This wasn't just in line with the traditions of this plane— it followed Norland customs as well. Nobles and commoners were different, even in death.

The bodies were quickly buried, and Flowsand had the knights escort the prisoners back, saying she still needed to pray for a while. The day's battle had left her status second only to Richard in their eyes, so they agreed. Almost all of them owed their survival to her, and now they only felt safe when she was on their side.

Flowsand stood quietly in place for a long time, watching as the footsoldiers and slaves disappeared from sight. She then opened the Book of Time, flipping to a page with an intricate illustration recording stories of the Eternal Dragon's priestesses wandering the planes. They spread the Dragon's teachings, searching for and curing a magic plague called the Paling Decrepitude. There was a strange spot of light in the picture. Flowsand looked at its location, and headed deep into the forest...

A bear roared out somewhere in the woods. One of the workers flew over to the broodmother and threw a rabbit towards it before returning, while the shrubs rustled as another dragged in a grey wolf larger than the drones themselves.

A furious snarl soon erupted nearby as a plump black bear charged out, another of the workers flying not far ahead of it. The bee-like creature flew along leisurely, always low enough for the bear to attempt clawing at it but still able to soar and dodge them by a hair's breadth. The bear itself had an obvious injury on its head, evidently a result of a fierce bite from the drone.

Seeing the bear pouncing towards it, the broodmother excitedly stood up and crawled forwards. When the opposing creature was

about ten metres away it sent a mental attack on its mind, causing the black bear to suddenly stiffen before it rolled on the ground in pain. Moments later, it moved no more.

By the time Flowsand walked out from between the trees, she saw that the black bear was almost completely eaten. The broodmother stopped eating to look at her wearily, its mouth opening slightly as concentrated acid dripped out in a steady flow. It was evident that any hostility or further approach would be greeted by an acid arrow.

Flowsand halted her footsteps, “There’s no need for you to be uneasy about me.”

The broodmother moved its mouth slightly, and the shell behind its head suddenly opened up a chunk to reveal a membrane. This ‘mouth’ moved, allowing the creature to speak somewhat like a human, even if its voice was hoarse and strange, “You don’t have a soul contract with Master.”

Flowsand smiled, “My relationship with your master is even more stable than one arising from a contract.”

“I only believe in contracts,” the broodmother replied.

“Why don’t you link to me?” Flowsand suggested, “That way, we’ll be able to communicate with our minds.”

The broodmother rejected the thought immediately, “Your divine force is powerful. Before I evolve, I definitely won’t link to your mind. Also, I suggest you put that book in your hand down, it is making me feel uncomfortable. I am already on the verge of attacking you.”

“This? No problem.” Flowsand raised the Book of Time as she spoke. Her movements immediately caused the broodmother to spread its shell, but then she crouched down and placed it properly on the ground to quiet it down.

“We can now talk properly. My name is Flowsand.”

“You can call me broodmother. Beautiful Flowsand, why have you sought me out?” it asked.

Flowsand sounded an ‘oh’ in answer, asking with interest, “Am I truly beautiful?”

The broodmother answered with a unique honesty, “Very much so. Everything with power, balance, and perfection is beautiful, and you meet all three criteria. Especially the pattern on your forehead, it has unimaginable strength. It’s so beautiful that it shocks me.”

“You flatter me,” Flowsand smiled. Even unsmiling Flowsand contained a mysterious, hallowed beauty. She was like the ruins of the Church of the Eternal Dragon, gleaming amber with great change concealed inside. However, when she smiled it was like the flow of time itself, encompassing the magnificence of the myriad countless planes. Her beaming face bloomed in a way that shook one to the core.

However, the priestess quickly withdrew that smile and stated solemnly, “Richard, your master, is not in a good state. He is very much in need of your strength.”

“I’m working diligently to grow,” the broodmother answered, “In fact, you’re disturbing my meal.”

Flowsand took a look at the black bear that was almost completely destroyed, asking, “Does this sort of food satisfy you? How far are you from full maturity?”

“The black bear is very good and powerful. I am currently three fourths of the way to evolving.”

“Very powerful...” Flowsand astutely caught the phrase used, “So besides flesh and metals, you need beings of great power as you feed in your larval form?”

“Flesh and metal are the basis of my growth. The more powerful my meal was in life, the more useful it is to me. I can analyse the

source of their power, making use of it for myself. Once I evolve, I will need food with mana in it.”

“Very good,” Flowsand nodded, “Come with me. I believe there is food that will be of use to you over there.”

The broodmother hesitated for a moment, but eventually followed the priestess. The rest of the black bear couldn't be wasted, so it summoned two of the drones back to drag it over.

Flowsand led the broodmother to the open space where the dead warriors had been buried. The creature spread its shell in excitement once it reached the area, but after several steps it stopped.

“Master said humans are not food,” it said.

“Humans can be friends or enemies. There is no need to hesitate over eating those who want to kill you. What's more important is that Richard needs your strength.”

“But Master...” The broodmother still held back, but after reaching this place, the black bear was no longer attractive to it.

“Richard abides by his own thoughts and principles. That is a source of incredible will, and is also why people will follow him, but I shall take over for the necessary things that he does not have the ability or desire to do. Broodmother, there is no need to hesitate. This is my responsibility. You are smart, and you should realise that this applies to both you and your master— your principles only matter if you can stay alive.”

The broodmother didn't move, but the two drones quickly tossed the bear aside and flew over, shovelling at the ground to reveal the corpses buried underneath. Right at the centre was Sir Menta, still in full armour and helmet. His large damaged shield covered his body, while the morningstar was placed in his hand.

The broodmother shifted its body, crawling to the open space. A giant shadow slowly covered the knight who had been consigned

to eternal rest.

Book 2, Chapter 22 - The Fall

Night fell, and Flowsand returned to the base. She checked on the physical condition of the prisoners, and met up with Richard at an arranged time.

Richard's room was in a small courtyard at the north side of the base. It was the residence of the leader of the reconnaissance troops, so it was quiet, spacious, and comfortable.

When Flowsand entered Richard's bedroom, she saw tens of ingredients on a table, divided neatly with the precision and discipline of a true runemaster. He had her sit on the bed, saying, "I've made some small alterations to the mana amplification rune. Based on the materials I have on hand, it should be around 20%. We don't have three important materials, so I can't reach the theoretical maximum of 30, even 25% will be difficult."

"That's already quite good, I'll be able to use another greater heal." Flowsand smiled as she asked, "Where will it be drawn?"

"On your right arm. It might hurt a little, take your clothes off first." Richard lowered his head as he focused on preparing the materials, not watching Flowsand remove her clothes. By the time he looked up again, he couldn't help but stare blankly, bewildered.

Flowsand had actually taken everything off save her underwear, leaving her beautiful upper body completely bare before Richard. She was slightly thin, but even if her full breasts weren't as large as Venica's, their arc was perfect. Her nipples were amazingly not pink, instead the same light amber of her eyebrows and pupils. They were slightly translucent, making them look like the most refined of carvings.

"You don't have to take so much off." Richard's voice was so small at that point that even he couldn't hear himself properly.

"It's not all that much. Anyway, you'll be able to see clearly like

this,” Flowsand stated indifferently. What she’d said was the truth; although the rune was to be tattooed on her upper right arm, Richard would need to strip her entire right side to ascertain the directions of mana flow. There wasn’t much difference between revealing one breast and both, but to Richard’s ears it sounded very strange.

Seeing Richard slightly distressed, Flowsand added, “This is all for the sake of survival.”

Richard picked up his magic pen and steeled himself, “Fine then, I shall begin.”

The tip of the pen used to tattoo the rune was actually an extremely fine, hollow needle. All the materials flowed down through the pinhole, allowing him to draw the lines on the subject with designated magical properties. This was why any pen used to create runes was a top-grade alchemic item.

Richard grabbed Flowsand’s arm with his left hand, while his right held the pen. Calm as ever, he drew a light stroke on the arm. His breathing grew more level, the pen so stable it was unnatural. The tip touched her skin gently, leaving a fine, shallow trace. The magic ink dripped from the tip, leaving an exceedingly meticulous line on her arm. Despite the natural curve of the human arm, this line’s arc was so precise it was unimaginable.

As the pen touched her skin again and again, a beautiful and complicated magic formation began to emerge on Flowsand’s arm. Tiny beads of sweat had already begun to show on Richard’s forehead, but his gaze was still focused, his breathing calm and drawn out. Those who heard him would feel a sense of peace and quiet.

The priestess’ free left hand held the interrogation notes Richard had prepared, and she was currently looking through them intently. There were two main parts to the material: one was about the political structure, social customs, and the power hierarchy of

the Whiterock Duchy, while the other was a topological map of Baron Forza's land and its surroundings. This map was much more detailed than the one they'd drawn up earlier, with signs indicating all the larger towns, Osfa included.

Flowsand finished going through all the material quite quickly, later turning to look at Richard silently. The youth in question himself didn't notice her gaze.

Another complicated line was on the verge of reaching its end, one of the most crucial and longest lines in the formation that extended to the interior of her arm. At the last moment, when he was just about to draw his pen back, a sparkling amber nipple entered his line of sight.

His breathing instantly grew rough, the power he'd controlled meticulously in his hand fluctuating. The tip of the pen lowered, stinging Flowsand's skin and creating a drop of blood.

"Crap!" Richard was vexed. Even a small mistake like this would lower the final amplification by half a percent. He rarely made such errors, so how could he explain this? Could he say that Flowsand's breast was so beautiful he'd been moved by the sight? That he lost control because of that?

Richard looked up to see Flowsand looking at him. Her eyes were sparkling like gems, while she had a slight smile that made it seem like she was well aware of anything.

Before Richard could say anything, her uniquely hoarse and slightly rough voice that was like a grain of time sounded indifferently, "I believe even a grand runemaster would definitely have made three to five mistakes by now."

Richard immediately felt relaxed, heaving a long sigh. He was about to explain that this was the first time he was drawing a rune on someone else's body, but to his surprise Flowsand continued, "But you really shouldn't have made a mistake like this."

All explanations were forced back in his throat.

Flowsand then continued, “Actually, you can look as you wish. You can touch if you want to as well.”

If these words could be considered powerful blows, her last ones were the ultimate, “Any time you want.”

“I... um, that’s not what I meant...” Richard suddenly felt his gift of wisdom leaving him.

She smiled, “It’s fine even if you did mean it. You’ll look and touch in the future anyway. Once you’re more used to it, you won’t mind much.”

Richard found himself speechless once more, and decided to just not explain as he continued his work. However, since he could he stole a few more glances at Flowsand’s breasts before he continued.

As expected, that was effective. He reached a third of the way through the rune as planned, making no more mistakes. Richard looked up after finishing the last line, his gaze naturally landing on Flowsand’s chest as he praised, “Very beautiful.”

Flowsand straightened her back as she answered, “They’re also springy. Want to give it a try?”

And thus, Richard suffered a complete defeat.

By the time he was done stowing away his materials and tools, Flowsand had put on her clothes. He immediately sighed in relief, feeling that the priestess exerted much less pressure when she was dressed.

Flowsand waved the notes in her hand, “All these notes, are you planning on taking on some of the people of this plane?”

Richard nodded, “That’s essential. It’s impossible for us to take over an entire plane with such small numbers.”

Flowsand looked at one of the pages, “Three knights and nine warriors... Why isn’t that priest in here?”

Richard froze, “He’s a priest of Neian. There’s faith in the equation now, how could we bring him over?”

Flowsand smiled, “Already 25 or 26, but still only level 3. His devotion is obvious, and it makes him the best person to take in. Someone of faith cannot go back once they give up on their god. Once the time comes, his head will be a bigger priority than ours to Neian’s worshippers.”

“But what’s the point? Without any favour from his god, won’t it be impossible for him to rise in rank?” Richard frowned.

“That’s the second step, one you don’t need to worry about. Leave it to me, the faith of the Eternal Dragon is far greater than of the gods of a secondary plane.”

Richard nodded and questioned, “What next, then?”

“Use the methods you used on those two warriors on him.”

Book 2, Chapter 23 - The Fall (2)

A short while later, miserable cries rang out from the interrogation room once more. The priest's voice was high-pitched and bright, the sheer volume of the scream showing his ability to praise his god. It was a pity, however. Despite his age he was only level 3. That showed how 'great' his devotion was.

The priest, Marvin, first cursed Richard loudly. However, that quickly devolved into prayers to his god, and not long after he was begging for forgiveness. A bout of pure misery later, he quieted down. The entire process took less than three minutes.

Richard had said that the five minute session he used on the sturdy warriors could kill the priest. He didn't possess the iron will that the veterans did, so even if Flowsand could heal his physical wounds his mind would likely crumble. However, this simplified three minute set seemed to work just as well. By the time Richard let Marvin down, he hid in a corner and hugged himself as he wailed, "What do you want to know? I've already told you everything, there isn't anything more. I even told you about the church!"

Having said this, the young priest actually hugged his knees and burst into tears.

"Quiet," Flowsand stated indifferently, and Marvin immediately withdrew his tears. To him, Richard's torture was nowhere near as terrifying as this cold rock in front of him, who'd constantly cast lesser healing spells to make it impossible for him to faint.

"Stand."

The young priest bounced off the ground immediately, his back sticking to the wall as he stood ramrod straight.

"How many lesser heals did I use just now?"

"Eight!" Marvin answered instantly. However, he suddenly

realised the meaning of that after he said it, and couldn't help but begin to tremble.

Richard shook his head. Flowsand evidently had much more control over the situation than he did, so he silently went to the side to clean his tools. However, just as he turned away he heard Flowsand call out to him, "Richard, give him another round."

"No!" Marvin yelled, "NO!" He pounced towards Flowsand, looking like he was about to grab her thighs as he begged, "I'll say anything, I'll do anything! Please, no more!"

Flowsand took a small step back, just enough to escape his embrace. She then bent over, placing her right index finger by her lips in a shushing gesture.

Marvin's cries dissipated even as he maintained posture, his two hands outstretched in a mock embrace as he froze in position like a statue. Their faces were now no more than twenty centimetres apart.

Flowsand's eyebrows raised, and Marvin slowly nodded. However, he obviously didn't understand what she meant.

She pointed at the wall once more, and Marvin immediately retreated to his original position, standing straight against it.

"You're willing to do anything?" Flowsand asked.

"Yes!" Marvin was extremely resolute.

"Then surrender!"

"Alright!" Came the answer, but only then did Marvin start to feel slightly dizzy.

Surrender? How would that work? He was a priest of the God of Valour, and only level 3 at that. If he betrayed his god he would drop in level, being unable to even use divine spells anymore. What use was a priest without his spells?

He tried to think harder. These invaders were the natural

enemies of the gods of this plane, or at least of the God of Valour. Even if it wasn't too late for him to change his faith, it was impossible for divine force to traverse the countless planes. Even if there was a god in that other plane, how many years would he have to work to return even to his current level?

However, Marvin did not look confused in the least. There actually wasn't much difference between a level 1 priest and a level 3. They were all trash, just of a different standard.

Flowsand turned to Richard, smiling as she said, "Look, he's already surrendered. How easy."

Richard almost fainted at that point. Indeed, it was easy, but that was a problem. It made his words worth little, but Flowsand likely had more in store for that.

As expected, she gave Marvin a piece of paper and had him draw the sigil of the God of Valour on it. Marvin looked confused, but he didn't dare go against her words. He even infused a bit of his divine force into the sigil, drawing it out completely. He wouldn't dare play any games in front of a priestess who could easily cast eight lesser heals.

Flowsand gave him another piece of paper and instructed, "Recite this!"

Seeing the short few lines on the paper, Marvin's hands began to tremble. His face finally turned pale, as he looked up at Flowsand and then at Richard. This time, Richard's bloodstained tools finally served their purpose—he lowered his pale face, beginning to chant the words on the paper phrase by phrase in a trembling voice. This was a paragraph written in the language of the gods, something that remained basically constant through the myriad planes. It was the first thing he'd had to learn in his training.

These words... They were the most vicious of curses against his god!

“I hereby swear upon my soul... I shall abandon your so-called glory, and throw it to the dirt...” Marvin’s trembling grew worse the more he spoke. “... Such is my testimony!” He felt weak the moment he finished, his face turning an unusual red as all the divine force in his body began to burn up. The scorching pain wasn’t as bad as Richard’s torture, but it wasn’t far apart!

Thankfully, he was only a level 3 priest. Had he been level 10, then the burning of his divine force would leave him dead. As someone who had once been a servant of this god, the curse would bring his god’s attention on him. It could be said that Neian paid more attention to Marvin then than at any other moment in the priest’s life.

Flowsand flipped open the Book of Time, a stream of light shooting out of the page. It formed a wisp of the golden sands of time, emanating an aura of dignity that came from the will of a supreme deity.

“Let go of your mind, and use all your soul to take in the favour of your new Lord. What you see now is what you will pray to for the rest of your life.” Flowsand’s voice was solemn, and the Marvin who was being burnt by his divine force could endure it no longer. He knelt down, beginning to pray loudly towards the wisp. Just as the prayers left his mouth, it turned into a strand of golden light that charged into his body, becoming a freezing cold that suppressed the heat.

A light golden lustre suddenly surged out of Marvin’s body. He took a look at his hands, unable to believe his own eyes! In that short period of time, he who had lost all grace felt the new divine force filling the gaps left behind by Neian’s power. His strength actually rose rapidly, only stabilising once he reached level 6!

However, the golden flames blazing on his body seemed slightly pale, and there was a slight scent of rot on him that was starkly different from Flowsand’s power.

Marvin placed his hands before his eyes and took a close look, his body beginning to shudder slowly. He looked up, forcing out a question after a struggle, “I’ve... fallen?”

Flowsand closed the Book of Time, speaking indifferently, “Congratulations, you’re now a fallen priest. Now, feel the great power you’ve been granted!”

A priest would face divine punishment if they cursed their god, the most common of which was having one’s divine force burn out. If they could get through that without dying, then another god could take them in. Many evil gods welcomed fallen priests, with some instances of the reverse as well.

The problem was that although such priests could obtain the divine force of their new god, the mark of the old one would not be erased. Thus why they were called fallen— their expertise wasn’t in spreading faith, but in eliminating the worshippers of other gods.

Marvin’s eyes stared hard at the Book of Time in Flowsand’s hands, and he took a step forward with the desire to touch it. However, Flowsand’s eyes flashed the moment he got close, and his fingertips burnt a pale gold. The pain was so bad that Marvin began to cry miserably, and in the blink of an eye he was sweating profusely.

“You can burn his divine force?” Richard was astonished.

Flowsand nodded, “His fallen divine force is under my control. The burning of level 6 divine force can weaken him, but at level 6 now betrayal will cost him his life. This is just a small warning; now that we’re done with the punishment, we can stop.”

The flames burning Marvin’s fingers disappeared as Flowsand spoke, leaving no traces of injuries at all. However, the soul-rending pain had been carved into the fallen priest’s mind.

“Go back to the prisoners, and hear what they’re saying,”

Flowsand instructed, and Marvin immediately followed a footsoldier to leave.

Richard couldn't hold his curiosity in once he was gone, "How did he connect to the divine force of the Eternal Dragon? I feel basically none of his power in this plane."

Flowsand raised the Book of Time in her hands, saying, "The Book of Time allows me to connect directly to the Eternal Dragon, no matter which plane I'm on."

Despite Flowsand's words, Richard felt that the ease with which they'd subdued Marvin wasn't really because of the Book of Time. Flowsand herself was the likely reason for such effectiveness. However, it was late into the night. He sent Flowsand off to sleep, while he returned to his room to meditate and restore his mana.

Book 2, Chapter 24 - Preparation

The next three days, the base was bustling with activity. Olar, Gangdor, and Waterflower took turns to guard against surprise attacks by the baron's troops, while Tiramisu spent day and night transcribing language proficiency scrolls, or just directly casting it on some. Trolls were an impatient race, and even his side job as a chef didn't help increase the mage's restraint.

In fact, the troll felt like the dull work was torturing him to the verge of insanity. However, he was smart, and wouldn't let his dislikes affect things of true import. With these scrolls, everyone would be able to learn basics of this plane's common tongue, including the seven knights. Although it would take time to grow fluent in it, speaking it at all would be a significant first step in gaining a foothold in this plane. Their return route long broken off, their best case scenario upon failure was currently death.

Tiramisu wasn't really fond of work. However, if the alternative was death then he considered being able to work a blessing. As for the tedium of it all, the clever troll knew to compensate himself with delicacies. Every day, all he did was copy the scrolls, sleep and eat. The most unique gift of troll mages and priests was that they did not need to meditate; sleep was the best way for them to recover mana. In fact, rest for them was even more efficient than meditation was for a human mage.

Medium Rare was preoccupied with an entirely different matter. He took on as much of the intense labour as he could, using his free time to repair the steel armours and weapons in the forge. The trolls left their human comrades in shock once more— Rare was as skilled at the craft as a dwarven smith.

Although his job was just as dull as his brother's, Rare considered this to be a chance to hone his strength. That was the most important attribute of a troll, the one thing they were most proud of. An increase in sheer strength translated into both offence and

defence. Their striking power would grow, while they would be able to wear heavier, more powerful armour. Moreover, increasing their strength was a direct way to increase their level.

Trolls also had great energy reserves, although they didn't rely on that as much as human knights did. Their strength always made battles easier anyway. Medium Rare felt like he wasn't far from getting to level 11, something that would allow him to add twenty kilograms to the 100 kilo hammers of his. If he accomplished that, he could send even the strongest of knights flying with a single swing, with even titled knights having trouble. Someone like Sir Menta may be able to block a few blows at that point, but even so he wouldn't be willing to fight Rare head on—that would be like digging his own grave.

Everyone was busy in their own ways. Waterflower was working on new clothes— she'd been stubbornly attached to her white trousers, but she didn't like how restricted she felt in them. She thus tore the corners apart, making them more like a skirt. She still remained barefoot all the time, but that hardly stained her snow white soles. Another thing she was working on was the Shepherd of Eternal Rest. Whenever Waterflower held the dull longsword in her hands, one was left feeling nervous and uneasy.

Olar, on the other hand, continued trying to get close to Waterflower and win her heart. The bard came up with a new poem everyday, presenting it to the girl who never smiled. It was rare to see him practising anything at all— it was like chattering non-stop was the route to him levelling up. Otherwise, it would be really hard to explain how he was level 9 at this point.

Having been caught between the two beauties of Flowsand and Waterflower for a brief period of time, he'd instinctively ended up distancing himself from Flowsand and choosing Waterflower instead. He was captivated by her wild personality, and the way she never directly rejected his flattery, tests, and even subtle pursuit egged him on both directly and indirectly.

As for her new fashion, he never held his praises back, always gasping in admiration. As long as her clothes were light, thin, small, and revealing, nothing could go wrong. The same couldn't be said for her sword, however, which was always met with astonished sighs.

Anyone who wasn't blind would be able to see that the power of the Shepherd of Eternal Rest was beyond comparison. Even Gangdor, who was far more powerful than Waterflower, wouldn't want to provoke the girl when she had the sword in hand.

However, the bard didn't approve all of her actions with it. Perhaps it would be better to say that some things he just couldn't comprehend. For example, nothing was more important in his opinion than using such a rare enchanted weapon as the Shepherd of Eternal Rest, but Waterflower spent a lot of time fiddling with a crude chisel and grinding the sword down.

However, she wasn't sharpening the Shepherd. No, she was working to make it even rougher. She said this would increase its power, but no matter how hard Olar tried he still couldn't see how that would increase its power. When he saw a look of understanding on Gangdor's face, however, he grew angry without reason.

'What a barbarian,' the graceful and knowledgeable bard thought to himself, 'He's pretending to understand something he doesn't!'

If Olar were asked to talk about the eyesores in the base, Gangdor would absolutely be on that list. This brute spent a great deal of time around Waterflower, and she didn't seem to mind him by her side as well. Another thing that dissatisfied him was the way Gangdor looked at him, which always seemed exceptionally strange. In fact, his gaze constantly centred on his rear!

That type of gaze made the elven bard especially alert against the barbarian's likes, and it also reminded him of some unpleasant memories.

As for Gangdor, every time he saw Waterflower fiddle with that chisel he always felt chills going down his spine. He felt like taking the time to polish his own axe, sharpening it. The battleaxe had grown almost as rough as a chisel by this point. He was also anticipating the time when the bard couldn't help himself from grabbing Waterflower's butt: that would definitely end wonderfully.

Such things had happened more than once in the Archeron death camp, and every time it was a topic of idle conversation for quite a stretch of time.

Life in the death training camp was actually very dull and tedious, so everyone would always hope to leave that ghost-like place as soon as possible. To be able to see an ignorant fellow suffer heavily, both physically and mentally, was most definitely a delightful pleasure. Since such incidents were not uncommon, and there were different categories. Those who didn't touch would be left able to walk, albeit barely, but they were afraid to sit and could only lay on their stomachs. Those who'd actually made contact? They were all dead.

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Richard was spending large amounts of time perfecting Flowsand's rune. He didn't make a single mistake over the three days, finally completing the mana amplification rune successfully. As Flowsand had said, once he saw more he got used to it.

The amplification rate was 21%, about as much as Richard had expected. With their current materials, it would be too much to ask for anything more. Flowsand estimated that this rune could grant her an extra greater heal, three more normal heals, and seven lesser heals. That was equivalent to the life of one of the infantry knights.

This increase in Flowsand's ability directly translated to an increase in the power of their party. Richard was now quite

confident in dealing with Forza. Ultimately, however, Forza was only a small lord in the borders of the duchy.

Over these three days, plenty of food, rest, and healing magic had left everyone cured of their injuries, returned to optimal fighting strength. In addition, with Medium Rare's unexpected craftsmanship, the warriors were all dressed in new shiny armor.

It was time to take action.

Book 2, Chapter 25 - Battle Beasts

Marvin left all by himself on the third night, heading out of the base. He took advantage of the darkness to hurry towards Sir Kocat's territory.

Kocat was Marvin's father, as well as Baron Forza's brother-in-law. Although he'd never surpassed level 9 even at the peak of his youth, his heritage and marriage had cemented his knighthood. In fact, Kocat was more important to the baron than even Hubert and Kojo, only falling short of Menta by a little.

This plane was chaotic with power struggles. Even though wars weren't as frequent or immense here as in Norland, they were still a norm. The elites made use of far too many excuses to wage war on each other; hell, they did it even when someone's horses trampled crops! There was no need for logic here, one only needed a minor excuse to wage war.

Of course, there were actual reasons for these wars being fought, prime of which was one party setting their sights on another's possessions. This could be things such as land, mines, certain local specialties, or even trade routes. Of course, those fools who fought to take their enemies' daughters or wives had already been eliminated over time.

Menta was a formidable fighter and commander that could not be missed, and Kocat was well aware of this. He'd always been a pragmatic person who could analyse the situation, and knew that his marriage alone would not be enough to give him full control of his lands.

Marvin had decided to look for Kocat for that very reason. If one wished to persuade him to stand on the side of the invaders, helping them at least from the dark. Richard had faith that Kocat would be convinced— after all, his only son had become a fallen priest, an arch-enemy of the God of Valour.

One source of Marvin's confidence in being able to convince his father was that Flowsand could offer a path to faith. The god of the invaders was so strong that they could infiltrate their plane. The primary reason the locals of a plane put everything into eliminating invaders was because their gods had a clear stance on them. No matter how powerful these intruders were, as long as the gods were willing to pay enough of a price they would be able to at least drive them away.

However, these invaders were different. Although they were much weaker than previous ones, they had the ability to provide faith! This lost the local deities their advantage in that respect, perhaps even reversing it. That was something he'd understood well from his experience.

Richard continued to pore over the dukedom's map after Marvin left, trying to figure out a point of attack. There were numerous labels on this map in the aftermath of the recent interrogations, giving him a lot of information.

As he continued to deliberate, a sudden thought entered Richard's mind. He raised his head, looking towards the dim and gloomy forest outside the window. He'd just gotten news that the broodmother had matured, growing to level 1. He was needed immediately to decide its future path.

He immediately put aside his current tasks, donning a coat and leaving his house. The broodmother was a few kilometres away, and he'd only need about thirty minutes to make it there.

However, as he left the base two giant worker drones that were over a metre long suddenly flew towards him, giving him a rude shock. Even in daylight these enormous creatures would be able to scare someone unsuspecting of them. Thankfully, Richard knew that these were the broodmother's drones used for foraging, sent to direct him to it.

He first went around the broodmother, examining his strange

contract beast. The creature was still covered in shiny black armour, its abdomen taking up two thirds of its entire body, but it wasn't as deformed as it was at birth. There were folds all over, vibrating gently as the broodmother breathed. The head was almost the same as when it was first born, difficult to spot against its current frame. The pincers had remained the same size as well, what was supposed to be a weapon now looking simply like cutlery.

As far as power was concerned, the broodmother's strengths currently lay in its mental attacks and the acid it spewed out, something that was far more useful than a large pair of pincers would have been. Furthermore, its six legs had grown even more sturdy, albeit more stubby as well. They could support its weight, but speed was a problem.

"Were there any other changes when you matured? Did you get any other means of attack or defence?" Richard asked excitedly.

The broodmother's voice sounded out in his mind, "No, Master. I'm not meant to fight in battles myself, and my mental attack and acid are my only ways to do damage. However, those are only self-defense mechanisms. Only when enemies are within a thirty metre radius of me can I use them, and if they choose to flee it's impossible for me to catch up. However, now that I've matured I have the ability to create attack drones. You can use them like soldiers."

"Attack drones?" The concept was unfathomable to Richard, "You mean like those workers?"

The broodmother explained, "Somewhat, but not entirely the same. The workers were the only drones I could conjure in my infant stage, and they have limited energy. They're only comparable to sturdy wolves at best, so even a low-level warrior with the right equipment could take them down. Their primary purpose is to forage for food, not to protect me."

Richard nodded. The workers were all bark and no bite, with many more terrible monsters out there. Other than a limited ability to produce paralysing venom, they had no special ways to attack. A level 5 shield warrior could easily defeat a few of them at the same time.

The broodmother continued, “The attack drones are different. Their sole purpose in life is battle, and that will remain the same unto death. Now that I’m mature, at level 1 I can create three a day, with enough energy to control a total of ten. Originally I could only spawn normal attack drones, but because of some special sustenance in my larval stage I’ve been able to enhance their traits to an extent.

“Here, this is information on them. Their blueprint was constructed based on the environment in this plane, but as I grow in levels you can amend it as you wish.” A few three dimensional blueprints suddenly appeared in Richard’s mind, all accompanied by large amounts of information.

These were land creatures similar to prehistoric raptors, with a pair of strong hind legs that allowed them to sprint quickly. Their front limbs were blades akin to the broodmother’s pincers, while they had well-developed, sharp canines that could pierce through plate armour. Each one was about as big as a large wolf, and they could erupt with power for short periods of time. They could travel faster than sixty kilometres an hour, faster than most warhorses.

In a one on one fight, these creatures were akin to level 5 human warriors. However, while it took years for a warrior to train to that level, and basic equipment for him to perform to ability, the broodmother could spawn three of these beasts in a day! And that was only at its current level— the production would pick up as it grew in power. This particular attack drone was called the raptor.

The broodmother had even been able to enhance the raptors, growing their strength by upto 20%. These enhanced raptors were sturdier than their normal kin, and at somewhere between level 6

and 7 in terms of power they could beat level 5 warriors with ease. However, they also took more energy to create so at full capacity the broodmother could only have upto eight total. On the other hand, it could still create three of them in a day.

Of course, there was a drawback to offset this— the raptors had a mere one year lifespan.

Richard had already expected great things from the broodmother, but even so he hadn't anticipated the amount of assistance it could provide. Within a month of maturing a broodmother could create a troop of a hundred-odd raptors that could rival elite soldiers in a month! This made planar conquest no problem for Richard. He could just step into a strange plane and overcome the military powers there— the broodmother would solve much of his problem. The only prerequisite was to ensure that it was fed well, but that wasn't a difficult task to accomplish.

More attack drones wasn't the only function of the broodmother's rising levels. It would unlock additional functions with each level, and its physical body would continue to be strengthened as well. At the same time, the process could be sped up by feeding it some special items like mana-filled crystals and the like. It could also absorb powerful creatures such as wyverns, draconians or even multi-headed snakes. The broodmother also stood a chance to crack the mysteries of those creatures, using their traits to enhance its drones. For example, the strength enhancement to the attack drones was uncovered because the broodmother had consumed a creature of great strength.

Of course, what Richard didn't know was that the person who'd made such a special contribution to the broodmother was Sir Menta.

Considering that Flowsand would be supporting his troops, Richard decided to focus on individual power over numbers. "Could a batch of the strength-enhanced raptors be spawned by tomorrow? I've decided to begin the offence in the morning."

“Please wait patiently. You’ll have the first batch in ten minutes,” the broodmother answered.

Book 2, Chapter 26 - Rallying The Troops

The broodmother's huge abdomen began to squirm the moment it finished speaking. It quickly laid three eggs in succession, each more than a metre tall. The shells were a pale green, and started vibrating the moment they fell to the ground. The powerful beasts within burst out in the blink of an eye, quick and violent as they devoured their shells whole before standing next to the broodmother.

Richard felt a cool wind in his mind, coming from three more points that had been added to his perception. These were the minds of the three raptors— they were connected to him from the moment they were born.

‘Come,’ Richard tried to command them, and the three raptors immediately ran to his side. They stared at Richard, watching him attentively with their small amber eyes. Dense, noxious air spewed out of their nostrils.

These enhanced raptors were a lot bigger and stronger than normal beasts. They were almost as tall as Richard standing upright, leaving even the biggest and thickest of blades useless against them. Even a metre-long sword would cause about as much damage to them as an axe swung by an elite.

‘Turn... Stop... Accelerate... Strike!’ Richard continued commanding them from his mind, and the three beasts followed his instructions without mistake. They seemed rather easy to control.

Of course, this was also because there were only a few of them now. Once there were more than a hundred, no matter what Richard wouldn't be able to exert as fine a control over them as he could now. He could already feel that there would be thousands of them in the near future.

One thing Richard was a little lost about was how he was to

handle the broodmother. It could move five kilometres in an hour at best, making it quite difficult for it to take part in their attack. However, the broodmother possessed the strongest offence against anything within its range. Even if Menta were to come back to life, he would die to just one of its acid attacks.

“I can stay here, Master. Take the drones along, they will be the most loyal of warriors,” the broodmother spoke up.

“But what about your safety?” Richard was still rather worried about the broodmother. These beasts gave him a profound, direct understanding of its importance. He couldn’t afford to lose it or put it in danger.

“There is no need to worry about me. There are no enemies nearby, only food, and I have nine workers to escort me now. Besides, I will have new beasts to guard me tomorrow. It is more important for you to destroy our enemies— as far as my knowledge of war goes, we’ll be safe once all the enemies are gone.”

Richard nodded, gently patting the broodmother. Without delay, he brought the three beasts along and left in a hurry.

He gathered his troops together at dawn the next day, looking around at everyone before speaking up, “We have come to this foreign plane, and everyone dispatched before has gone missing. We’ve endured two bloody battles in succession ourselves, and lost three of our brothers. Nearly every one of us has been injured! Now? It’s time to teach those sons of bitches a lesson!”

Richard’s voice was so clear and powerful that there could be no doubt about his determination and strength. Perhaps it was his elven blood, but he looked so handsome that the only thing missing from him now was an imposing and murderous aura.

“That was much better than the first time,” Flowsand commented expressionlessly, “As far as rallying speeches go, it was acceptable.”

Gangdor, on the other hand, was very much impressed. He stroked his short, grizzly beard, “That was good swearing, boss!”

Richard didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. All of the hard work he’d put into that war cry was wrecked in an instant by the brute’s comment.

With how important this counterattack would be, Richard had prepared their battle plans with great detail. Almost every famous general in history rallied their troops before war, increasing their soldiers’ morale and thus growing the army’s power. Although there were only a dozen soldiers, three beasts, and a broodmother under Richard’s command, that was nearly a small army unto itself. The rallying speech was essential.

Richard was well aware that he had to learn to lead troops in battle if he wanted to return to Norland alive. He’d spent the little free time he’d had in the past few days trying to recall famous historic battles and the biographies of revered generals, all in an attempt to learn what he could. 99% of the books he’d read in life were about magic, with so few on war and history that it was almost pitiful. And he’d only read those books in a hurry once he’d reached Faust, so he didn’t have many resources either. To nobody’s surprise, his first attempt at rallying his troops had failed.

At that time, Richard involuntarily thought of Gaton. That unbridled, boorish man always seemed to have a sort of charm to him, but he never seemed to be fake. No matter what someone was following him into, they always ended up feeling more confident. Just like on the night of the sacrifice— whenever he’d seen the view of his father’s back, Richard had immediately felt more at ease.

Seeing Richard’s embarrassed look, Gangdor laughed heartily, “Boss, you actually don’t need to say so much to us, everyone already knows this. Something like you want to us to follow you to do something, right...”

He suddenly clenched his fists, punching the thick wooden table in front of him. With an ominous glint in his eyes, he roared, “Kill those fuckers!”

Richard was caught between laughter and tears, “How?”

“Kill them and fuck them, however you want to!” Gangdor answered, as if for granted.

Richard spoke in all seriousness, “But we should be sure of the terrain, enemy numbers, and settle battle plans before waging war, no?”

“Haven’t you already thought of all that, boss?”

“Yes, but...”

Richard was about to add something when Gangdor interrupted, “Then we do that!”

Rendered helpless, Richard took a deep breath and tried to calm himself down, “But my decisions might not always be right.”

In a loud and casual tone, Gangdor exclaimed, “No boss, your decision will always be most correct! You don’t have to be humble, no one here would know the situation of the battlefield better than you. Your commands at the battle a few days ago were absolutely brilliant! Every time I felt like giving up, you appeared like a miracle, lending me a hand or having Miss Flowsand heal my wounds! You should have seen the look on that Menta fellow’s face, it was priceless! I’m definitely not alone in feeling this boss. Trust that you were born to be a general, and let your talents shine now!”

Richard’s face turned red once again—he had indeed turned the situation around time and time again in their last battle, but that wasn’t because of his proficiency in the art of war. Precision allowed him to determine from even the smallest signs who was about to collapse, so he could run up and support them. He could also detected the positions of the people contracted to him, so in

that small battlefield it was like everything was transparent to him. The combination of these two aspects, along with a little luck and the massive support from Flowsand's endless spells created that miraculous result. This left him unable to tell whether Gangdor was speaking the truth, or singing formal praises for his leader.

Gangdor was not done, however, "Especially that call for us to gang up on them in the end. That was practically the bearing of a famous general!"

Those who ganged up and beat others extended beyond generals and mages. In fact, the gangsters on the streets were more familiar with such things. Richard was left in an awkward position, only bailed out by Gangdor following up with another question, "Boss. If you want to rally your troops before war, don't you have to tell us why we're fighting and what we'll get when we win?"

The answer was not difficult. Richard immediately replied, "Of course, it's to return to Norland!"

To his surprise, Gangdor merely shrugged. "Going back might not be better than staying here. Besides, to be honest that goal is too far away. You need to give us something immediate, something tangible. It doesn't need to be a lot, or even grand. For example, I defeated a man at the death camp to steal his meal. I won a fight with a woman, and got her for the night. If you're the first to submit your plaques in a month, you get two extra doses of medicine. It's all that simple, but it's definitely effective."

Gangdor's words left Richard in deep thought. Just as he was thinking, Gangdor suddenly yelled strangely. He abruptly jumped across the table, bolting to the other side of the hall. The brute may have been big and sturdy, but his speed and agility did not lose out to that of a rogue.

Everyone turned to look at Gangdor at once, but that fellow just shocked everyone with the cheek to stand there like nothing had

happened at all. His expression remained neutral, betraying no hints of the scene that had just played out. It gave one the illusion that he hadn't moved an inch, and had been at the same spot all this while.

But he had lost his composure, so of course something had happened. Even as he was speaking, something had poked into his lower back and continued moving down. His instincts had fired up in the face of true danger, and as familiar as he was with this killing intent he didn't spare the time for a second thought before following those instincts to flee to safety.

Hugging the Shepherd of Eternal Rest, Waterflower's head was hung low and her eyes were half-closed as if nothing had happened. She'd learnt the art of disguise within a few days of leaving the Archeron death camps.

This little episode livened up the atmosphere, just in time to melt Richard's awkwardness away. BANG! He struck the table hard, mimicking Gangdor. This punch seemed somewhat legitimate, even though it was still too intricate and lacked power. However, it was probably too much for a mage who based his life around precision to follow in the rough and unconstrained ways of a warrior.

Smashing the table, he declared articulately, "This attack is for money and women!"

"Not bad!" Gangdor cheered, and Olar's eye lit up as well, "We're snatching women? I like this!"

Flowsand smiled faintly, "I like this too."

The elven bard paused for a moment, glancing at Flowsand. It was difficult to continue with this topic, since what Flowsand had said sounded extremely ridiculous, but of course there were all sorts of eccentrics in the nobility. Olar also couldn't make out whether she was serious or sarcastic, so he shut his mouth. There were only tough battles ahead; smart people would know to stay

out of trouble and avoid offending the priestess.

The trolls clearly didn't think as deeply as the elf. Medium Rare immediately followed up with a shout, "Let's get troll women too!"

"Of course! If we meet any, we'll take as many as we can!" Richard replied with a smile.

And thus, a chaotic rally to arms came to an end.

Book 2, Chapter 27 - A Sudden Attack

Richard spread out a map on the table, pointing to a small town, “This is Joven, the target of our attack.”

Unlike Osfa, Joven was quite large and prosperous. It connected many towns in the mountains to the Baron’s castle, making it a hub for materials like wood, ore, and hide. The town’s position also made it a supply point for adventurers that many preferred to Osfa.

With a total of more than 500 families and 2000 citizens, the town had many shops. Adventurers could easily find the supplies they needed here, with everything from blacksmiths to goldsmiths. The only building missing was a church, but the only one in the barony was in its capital.

That was one grand building, built to prove Baron Forza’s devotion. It was as expensive to build and maintain churches as they were big, however, so the baron wouldn’t be able to afford a second in his territory.

Joven was also Sir Kojo’s fief. He normally lived in a large estate outside the town, with a training camp for his soldiers being nearby. The thirty-odd elite warriors under his command were normally stationed in that camp.

However, that camp was now deserted, with the only ones there now being a few of his younger retainers. All of the warriors had followed their lord on an expedition to kill the invaders, but none had returned.

As a result, the knight’s manor had been packed densely these past few days. There were a lot of guards, with frenetic, lost people all over. These guards had only been training for a short while, not even considered normal soldiers. However, with the loss of their elites they had no choice but to call on the militia from the farmlands to make up for the guard posts.

The few escapees from the second battle had returned a few days ago, bringing news of their loss. The bad news had spread like wildfire in a drought-ridden grassland, spreading quickly across the entire barony. Even Menta and Hubert had been killed, so the fate of their expedition was obvious.

Nobody could predict when the demons from another plane would appear, so some of the branch families had already started packing, prepared to flee. Their actions were a result of excess panic, however; most were calm. They weren't all that far from the capital, and the baron's troops were still there. The Church of Valour wouldn't ignore these intruders either, and Baron Forza still had Earl Jayleon backing him, one of the three earls of the duchy. Thus, despite the panic and disturbance the people of Joven would be able to survive another night.

Joven was about forty kilometres away from the mountain range. Since there were many mercenaries and adventurers moving through the cities, and with the occasional rebellion from those in the mountains, there was a wall surrounding the town. Kojo's estate had its own defences as well.

A fast shadow appeared before Joven as night fell, quietly circling the town before vaulting over the three-metre-tall walls without issue. It quickly appeared once more at Kojo's estate, wandering around and examining the terrain and defences under the cover of the night. The militia on the arrow towers didn't even notice the new presence, letting the intruder examine key areas before leaving in the dark.

One hour later, a sizeable troop quietly appeared on the outskirts of the town. Richard looked into the distance through the darkness of the night, faintly able to see Joven's outline. He waited patiently, and Olar soon emerged from the darkness to whisper, "There's about fifty militia in Joven, Master, weak and poorly armed. However, there are many adventurers in the town with a small mercenary troop that total another fifty as well. Those

people are far better than the militia. I felt like some of them were over level 6, but I didn't dare approach them.

"There were many men at Kojo's manor, but they're just the militia. However, the training camp isn't far away, with almost thirty retainers there and an equal number of hired help. If needed, they'd be able to form a troop themselves.

"What about the warhorses?" Richard voiced his main concern.

"The warhorses are concentrated around the estate and the training camp, about twenty in each with all of excellent quality."

Richard was quite satisfied with that information. He confirmed things with the map once more, before pointing at the prisoners they'd brought along, "They were good at leading the way, give them some weapons!"

Medium Rare took a sack of weapons and shields off his back, passing them to five of the captive warriors. Everyone was given a sword and a small, round wooden shield.

These five warriors had been born commoners, with little loyalty to their lord. Under the threat of death, they chose to serve. Their head was familiar with the lay of the land, which was why Richard's forces had managed to make it to the outskirts of Joven undetected.

Richard had only brought along three of his knights this time, armed with shield and axe. The remaining four had been left at the base, tasked with guarding the prisoners who refused to capitulate. Everyone else had followed him into the attack.

"The estate first!" The troop went under the cover of the darkness once more under Richard's orders, prowling towards Kojo's manor. Between the many contrasting silhouettes were the profiles of three oddly shaped beasts.

The main entrance to Kojo's manor was tightly sealed, with only a small area before it lit up by some lamps. There was an archer in

each of the two towers guarding the gate, behind the cover of the walls to scan through the darkness regularly. Although it was early into the summer, it was extremely cold that night. The wind was especially strong so far high, making the two soldiers stationed there suffer.

One of them was already curled up, his worn-out armour was like a steel plate that was immersed in water. He was cursing at the weather under his breath, but just as he wanted to start moving he heard an extremely soft noise.

The sentry immediately stood up, on his guard as he looked over the wall. However, Richard had already entered the tower like a ghost, covering his mouth with one hand as he sent a dagger through the man's back. The sentry struggled and twitched for a while, but soon grew motionless. On the other side, Olar had struck the archer down like a shadow, having him collapse immediately.

Seeing that Olar had already defeated the other guard, Richard conveniently cast an elementary magic flame. It was extremely striking in the darkness, prompting many murderous silhouettes to rush out of the darkness as they pounced upon the manor. Olar leapt in as well, watching Waterflower break the lock with the Shepherd of Eternal Rest and use her strength to slowly pry the heavy doors apart.

The patrolling militia discovered the gates opening, but by then it was too late. Warning whistles, screams, and alarms rang out, and the entire manor delved into chaos!

Book 2, Chapter 28 - A Sudden Attack (2)

A few patrolling guards burst towards the front gate with torches in hand, just in time to see a pack of armed enemies surrounding the manor. Their leader could clearly see the faces of these bandits under the torchlight, and he was able to make out a few familiar faces. He exclaimed in shock, “Pierre! Is that really you? Uncle Yomen? Why are you guys here? Didn’t you follow Sir Kojo to find those demons from another plane?”

Being exposed, Pierre and Yomen were forced to stop in their tracks. The remaining three of Richard’s prisoners stopped as well, but despite the momentary stall the patrol couldn’t figure out the situation. Gangdor betrayed a cruel smile from behind the prisoners, holding tight to the axe in his hands. The knights moved forward to flank, while Waterflower remained hidden in Gangdor’s shadow, holding her breath.

That very moment, Richard issued a cold order from the tower he was surveilling the situation from, “Yomen... Kill them!”

The moment his voice sounded out, the middle-aged warrior immediately waved his sword subconsciously, almost as if he’d heard the whispers of a devil. The youth across him was stunned, looking down in disbelief at the wound on his chest. The cut was long and deep, almost revealing his internal organs; Yomen had evidently used all his strength.

That strike had hit the youth’s vital points in a single strike, so fast he hadn’t even had the time to react. It was a swing that broke the bones in his body, but he didn’t so much as sway. It was clearly an exquisite, vicious strike.

Yomen had definitely showcased his fundamental skills as a veteran warrior with that one strike.

As the sword landed, even Yomen himself was stunned for a moment. However, he recovered immediately and took another

step forward, stabbing the young guard in his abdomen.

“KILL THEM!” a shout rang out, but this time it wasn’t Richard.

“KILL THEM ALL!” Yomen was cutting down a guard with every one of those shouts, and the other prisoners seemed to awaken from their reverie as they pounced on the guards as well. Despite being outnumbered, they killed their opponents off one after the other. Seven to eight guards had been cut down instantly between the flashes of blades.

Regardless of age, all the prisoners that had accompanied Richard this time had seen blood, had deaths on their heads. How could a civilian militia hope to match them in a melee?

Since the fight had already begun, the prisoners freed up their hands and feet completely, holding up shields and swords against another pack of guards who’d rushed up to provide assistance. Blood was spilt once more, the new arrivals defeated as well without a single survivor remaining. Even the ones who were critically injured weren’t let go, swords slashing into or stabbing them without question. The viciousness of these men without escape caused even Gangdor to shrug his shoulders.

Richard had prepared a fireball, but it turned out to be of no use. He jumped down, casting a featherfall spell as he fell gracefully to the ground. A loud commotion rang out from the central and side towers at that moment, with large numbers of guards marching out. They were all disheveled, some even unarmed, but their sheer numbers would still give them an overwhelming advantage.

The five prisoners were gasping rapidly, huddled close to each other. Every one of them was injured to some extent, but that only increased their ferocity. They glared at their former comrades with bloodshot eyes, holding firmly onto the steel swords in their hands.

Flowsand walked out of the dark at that moment, healing spells already falling onto the two most severely hurt of the lot. Although

the warriors were surprised, it served to be a huge boost to their morale!

Richard was already floating in mid-air. He infused mana into his voice, screaming loudly, “KILL ALL WHO DARE RESIST!”

The voice engulfed the entire manor, leaving the charging guards startled. They slowed down involuntarily, but soon they were pushed forward by the waves behind them. Their battle cries this time were exceptionally fierce, as if hoping to boost their own valour.

Richard walked out of the crowd with his right arm raised, waving out a signal. A sudden, sharp hiss rang through the night sky, as a piercing arrow nailed one of the guards on the front lines dead to the ground. Richard pushed his hand down, spawning four brutal boars in front of him. These creatures were all blessed by Flowsand the moment they emerged.

Four huge shadows galloped into enemy ranks, leaving them a huge mess. One of the boars had sunk its teeth into the waist of an unlucky chap during the charge, raising him up into the sky to the tune of piercing screams.

Gangdor was so excited that his face was flushed red. He rushed out of the crowd, exclaiming, “My axe can’t— ”

But at that exact moment, a loud cry rang out near him as an attack of blazing energy rushed past him. The fireball moved out farther, exploding in the midst of the patrolling guards, the edge of the explosion only a few metres away from the brute. Had he been any faster just then, leaping into the guards, he would have been bathing in fire right now.

Gangdor was well aware of how scary Richard could be. He could cast fireballs extremely quickly, and if the first one had exploded that meant the second one would already have left his hands. He couldn’t help but retreat— the second one would only be faster.

As expected, even as the waves of the last fireball continued to spread out another one had already flown past him, exploding between the remaining guards. In fact, these two fireballs also encompassed the brutal boars that were in the melee. Two of them had broken out of Richard's control with the first one, turning to look at the culprit with revenge in their eyes. However, the second one had sent the remainder of the four boars and all of the twenty-odd guards straight to hell.

The manor fell silent at once.

In a matter of seconds, with three spells in total, the first wave of guards had been cleared out. As they looked at the messy but now-empty square, it wasn't just the opposing guards that were awestruck— even many of the people on Richard's side were secretly scared.

Gangdor's eyelids started to twitch vigorously. Had he not listened to Richard's orders, jumping into the crowd according to plan, he would have died to the explosions before he could wave his axe. No level 10 warrior would want to suffer a single fireball, much less two less than a second apart. Even a level 11 warrior wouldn't be able to recover from that.

In fact, a level 12 warrior like Sir Kojo, who also had excellent armour, had been defeated by five of Richard's fireballs. If not for Richard 'taking care' of the knight's subordinates, he would have been able to focus the damage on the knight and take him down with just four.

The second batch of guards were just gathering, when they suddenly cried out in alarm. They turned to leave in a hurry, escaping into the manor itself. They seemed to forget that Richard could set it ablaze with two of his fireballs, killing them nonetheless.

Although there were still nearly a hundred guards left in the manor, their will to fight had been wiped out by those three spells.

Richard raised his right arm high once more, pointing out at the central building of the estate, “Leave the women and children alive. Kill any men who dare resist!”

Richard had barely finished his sentence, but Gangdor had already thrown himself out like a whirlwind. His thunderous roars echoed through the night, “I’ve been waiting all night for this! Watch out for my tough axe, lizards! It’s hungry for blood!”

SHLICK! Gangdor’s axe sliced at the waist of the last of the patrol guards, nearly splitting him in half. Following that, the giant rammed his way into the main building, shouting louder than the endless cries and screams.

“My axe can’t handle the hunger anymore...”

“My axe can’t handle the hunger...”

“My axe...”

“Handle...”

“Hunger...”

“HUNGER!!”

The brute was evidently killing so fast he couldn’t shout as fast as he killed.

The prisoners, knights, raptors... Even Waterflower and Flowsand rushed into the manor, leaving the trolls to block the front and rear exits with their huge bodies. However, there were still some people scurrying about, trying to escape by climbing the walls of the estate. But how would they ever escape the sight of Richard, who was standing alone on the square? All Richard had to do was to point his finger at those figures, and bows would be drawn in the dark, arrows one after another piercing through their bodies in a split second. It was like he was a god of death, ordering their lives away.

In just a few short minutes, the noises from the massacre had

audibly lessened. Gangdor's deafening chant had also become more and more complete.

A fortunate patrol guard had escaped through the back door of the main building, and cleverly jumped onto a horse in the back stable as it rushed out madly. He sped along the walls, trying to hide in the shadows of the trees as he quickly approached the now-unguarded main gate.

Olar quietly appeared by Richard's side, his bow long drawn. The arrowhead was burning with tracking flames, and the elf already knew that he would definitely pierce through the man's heart. Just as he was about to release, however, Richard suddenly held him back.

Surprised, Olar exclaimed, "Master, he'll definitely notify the training camp!"

"Let him go," Richard replied calmly.

A short while later, the guard safely made it out of the manor on his horse, disappearing into the darkness of the night.

Book 2, Chapter 29 - Trap

The battle in the manor ended quickly, and the battle outside was reaching a close as well. The women and children had been chased to a side hall, while the surrendered soldiers were locked up in several rooms. If anyone tried anything silly, there would be nothing a fire inside a sealed room would not fix.

It was only then that Richard entered the manor— such close-ranged battles were far too dangerous for a mage, especially at his level. He searched for the three raptors in his mind, trying to determine how much they had left in them. All three still had more than half their strength remaining, so even if they'd been unavoidably hurt the result was pleasant. He ordered them to search for any hidden soldiers, bringing his own out. Dead beasts were replaceable, but his knights were not.

There were more than ten women in the side hall, with about seven or eight children as well, all huddled together in fear. They'd watched helplessly as their enemies appeared suddenly, and while the thick stench of blood had made a few of these ladies swoon at first, they had persevered on.

Richard paced from side to side in front of these ladies, memorising the reactions of each. He then spoke up, "If any of you here can point out Kojo's wife or children, you will immediately be released."

The women all kept their calm at first, but the vicious gleam in these thugs' eyes and the blood still dripping from their weapons was a constant reminder of what would happen if they didn't leave this dangerous place immediately.

A horrendous wail suddenly resounded throughout the building, striking fear into the hearts of those present. A young woman who was dressed like a peasant immediately jumped up, pointing to one of the ladies and shouting, "It's her! She's Kojo's wife!"

“Plebeian! You will die a death by whipping!” the lady screamed, her voice a mixture of extreme terror and fury.

With someone opening it up, the rest of the women followed. Their only fear at that point was that the others would give up a name before they could. “That’s Kojo’s son! That hag is his mistress!”

All of Kojo’s family had been named within the blink of an eye. He had a main wife, two mistresses, a son, and a daughter. In a rare gesture of generosity, Richard waved to the women dressed like peasants, “Very well. You are free to leave.”

The women trembled as they slowly dragged to the door, but when they realised that there was nobody stopping them they ran out screaming.

“Olar. Bring two men with you. Take this esteemed lady for a walk. Please apprise us of the Knight’s collections, my lady.”

“Your wish is my command, Master!” Olar answered politely. His extensive background with the wealthy and influential had given him a keen perception that made him the ideal candidate to confiscate Kojo’s possessions.

“You only have ten minutes,” Richard reminded the excited elf.

“If that is the case, it will be necessary to use some slightly unscrupulous methods,” Olar replied.

“That’s up to you,” Richard waved him off. Olar took two of the knights along with him, pulling the wife and mistresses from their positions as he headed upstairs.

Just as expected, the bard managed to clear out Kojo’s treasures in the ten minutes he had been given. Gold, jewels, and precious metals, the total value worth about 5,000 gold coins.

That was all expected, however. What Richard hadn’t expected was an ornate box with three mana crystals the size of a finger within. Those were really useful— they could be used to enchant

equipment, or create potions. The crystals could also be used to power a magic formation as well.

These crystals looked and were structured the same as the ones Richard was used to, indicating that mana worked pretty much the same way in this plane as in Norland. It also implied that there was a vein somewhere here— something that was great news to a mage like him.

The expressions of the three women were quite unnatural, especially of the prettiest of Kojo's mistresses. It was obvious that Olar had cast his charms on them, and the effects were more than desirable.

Richard took note of the time, immediately giving the men their next missions. He stuffed the women and children into two horse carriages, ordering someone to escort them back to the base. At the same time, the five defectors led twenty men who'd surrendered to ambush the reinforcements from the training camp.

Richard cast a glance at the arrow tower of the manor before setting off, ordering it lit up in flames. Smoke shot up into the sky as the building became an enormous torch, visible more than ten kilometres away. This was a hint that the invaders had already retreated, also preventing the reinforcements from Joven or elsewhere from running in the wrong direction.

The defectors had provided the ambush site, and they succeeded in catching more than ten cavalry and twenty infantry from the training camp. A wave of soldiers rushed forth under Richard's command, comprised of the newly surrendered soldiers who'd been armed with weapons. The trolls were right behind along with Richard's knights, while the three raptors stealthily flanked to the enemies' rear, ready to attack.

These reinforcements didn't have powerful knights like Kojo's original army, and they were crushed almost immediately. Richard didn't even get a chance to use magic. They just cleaned up

casually, before moving on to the next point of ambush. These were the guards from Joven.

This ambush was slightly more difficult than the previous one. Aside from the guards, there were more than ten adventurers as well. An old level 5 mage had actually showcased his power, launching a fireball at the army. However, that had also made him a target for execution, and Olar had sent an arrow punching through his chest in a matter of moments.

Still, they'd only lost two of the defecting soldiers and had three more gravely injured by the time the enemies were annihilated, all due to that old mage's spell. However, with Flowsand's healing magic the injured would only need to rest for ten days before they could enter the battlefield once more. The very fact that they'd been healed greatly boosted the morale of the surrendered soldiers.

One attack and two ambushes had completely destroyed all remnants of Kojo's power. At least for that night his fief was like a young lady with her clothes ripped off, about to be raped and pillaged at will.

Even outside of the treasure, Richard had gotten more than thirty new soldiers. They'd gotten armour from the training camp, along with more than twenty warhorses that allowed Richard to form his own cavalry.

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They moved on Joven at dawn. The trolls and the raptors had been left behind, in case they scared the citizens.

"Enemy Attack!" "Lord, it's the devils from another plane!"
"Quick! Get help!"

Amidst the tense, chaotic screaming and warning alarms were a few tragic wails, fragmented and dispersed. Any guard that rushed towards Richard's contingent was hacked to death in seconds. His knights were well-rounded soldiers, able to fight on horseback or

on foot.

Eventually, nobody outside of a few rash idiots came forward anymore. All the buildings shut their windows tightly, and the people hid behind their doors with bated breath.

Richard moved along on his warhorse, gradually coming up to an empty square in the middle of the small town. He asked indifferently, “where is your mayor?”

He hadn’t been loud, but with the utter silence in that moment his words had travelled far. A two-storeyed building opened after a moment, the wizened mayor shuffling out from within. He stood in front of Richard’s horse, mustering all his courage to ask, “I am Joven’s mayor, my Lord. Might I ask what brings you here, and what you require? I will try my best to satisfy your needs, but I have one tiny request: please stop the massacre!”

The townspeople had quietly followed the mayor’s lead, gathering in the empty square. A few corpses were still strewn on the ground, the blood barely coagulated as its stench wafted out with the morning wind.

Richard glanced at the gathered crowd, “Anyone who dares touch my men will be killed immediately. I will brook no discussion.”

Book 2, Chapter 30 - Tax

“Most of our guards have perished,” the mayor exclaimed with a pained expression on his face, “As for those who have not... I see that many have joined you. There isn’t anyone else here who would dare put up any resistance.”

“I would hope so,” Richard said as he waved his hand in front of him. “We may come from a different plane, but we aren’t some demons who seek to destroy and slaughter. Do not be fooled by your puny god of valour, we have our own god backing us, and he is far more powerful! Flowsand!”

Flowsand moved forward upon hearing her name, flipping open the Book of Time as she cast a blessing on the old mayor. The man panicked as everyone saw a blinding flash fall upon him, but that light gave off a warm glow. Despite carrying with it the vicissitudes of time, it held a strong aura of life and death, clearly displaying the power of a true god, not something dark and evil.

Blessings were an elementary divine spell, but at their core they were unlike any other. They were bright and potent for their level, their effects simply mind-blowing. Seeing one in front of their very eyes, the townspeople went into an uproar.

Richard took advantage of the situation, loudly proclaiming, “We are here upon the true god’s directions, to spread his glory! Joven shall henceforth be my territory, and I, Richard Archeron, shall be your leader. All property that once belonged to Sir Kojo or Baron Forza is now under my charge.”

The announcement brought great relief to the villagers. Wars between aristocrats were normal, but most of them had lived in Joven for generations and only a few had migrated from elsewhere. Life went on regardless of who the ruler was, the only change being the amount of tax they paid.

However, the past few skirmishes from Richard’s army had

caused great casualties. Many soldiers had died at their hands, and the families of the dead militia despised him right now. Such hatred could not be quelled easily, but that was something Richard was well aware of. He was not going to ease their resentment of him, instead ruling with the power of fear.

The mayor asked a crucial question, “Lord Richard, are you planning to take over this territory permanently?”

Richard glared at the mayor and loudly proclaimed, “Indeed. However, I am required at another battlefield right now, and I will be leaving soon. You shall make your decision by then, but I hope you will not let me down when I return. For now, though, pay me all the tax that you owe Kojo.”

The mayor frowned, about to reason that it wasn’t time yet to hand over their taxes. However, a loud protest suddenly rang out from the townspeople behind him.

“You demons from another plane, get out of our world!” a young teenager shrieked, brandishing a dagger he’d carefully concealed as he made a mad dash for Richard.

“Son, come back!” a middle-aged warrior rushed after him. The man was tan, his muscular physique indicating that he was full of strength and vigour. However, he was too slow to stop the teen.

“For the God of Valour!” the boy shouted, rushing towards Richard.

However, he seemed to lose all control of his body mid-charge, falling to the ground. The boy twitched a few times, but soon stopped moving completely. A tiny wound appeared on the portion of his back behind his heart, and blood started seeping out. His clothes were dyed red.

Waterflower remained in place, seemingly never having moved. It was unknown when the Shepherd of Eternal Rest had been unsheathed, but a drop of fresh blood dripped off the tip of the

blade. However, its sharp edge still seemed newly polished, without a trace of the attack remaining.

“SON! I WILL AVENGE YOU!” The warrior charged forth as well, his eyes bloodshot as he bared his sizeable fists at Richard. However, the young lady seemed to move slightly once more, another drop of blood appearing on her blade.

The man managed to take two more steps, before falling head first at the mayor’s feet. His blood rapidly soaked the old man’s shoes.

Richard barely seemed to notice the two casualties, speaking coldly to the mayor, “Do you see this? I never issue empty threats, and there is a limit to my patience and respect. I’m just following aristocratic tradition.

“Now, if you still wish to resist my rule, then you are my enemies. That is, you are forcing me to become a demon. Demons do not need followers.”

“I understand, my Lord. Please give me some time, I will hand over the taxes we were supposed to pay the next season.” The mayor had spoken with a pained expression of resignation on his face, and he slowly retreated to his humble residence.

Richard’s tax from Joven was a hundred gold coins, two full hides from slain beasts, as well as two boxes of books. That was all the literature available in the town, used in place of 300 coins. The mayor believed the books to be worth a tiny fraction of the amount Richard had waived for them, however, something that gave him some consolation.

Thirty defected soldiers followed behind Richard as he left. During the entire time they were here, these thirty had been the target of even more attention than Richard himself. Almost all the soldiers were close to or at least knew someone from Joven. After all, the land was only so large and the leaders had formed intricate bonds.

The defectors had blood on their hands, but they didn't have any option but to continue fighting for Richard. Unlike those who dared stand against him, they did not have the will to fight the mage. They had seen the trolls and raptors, and knew that resistance would be futile.

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It wasn't until noon the next day that the Baron's reinforcements arrived. There were several hundred of them, their scale far exceeding Menta's army, but there were only three novice knights and a handful of veterans past level 5 amongst their ranks. Even if they had strength in numbers, Menta's smaller army was actually better than them in terms of capability. That was why they had barely managed to cover twenty kilometres in a day.

The Baron had sent half his army over. Logically speaking they should have been led by a titled knight, but with Kojo missing and Menta and Hubert confirmed dead, the other two titled knights had suddenly fallen gravely ill as well. Forza was already fifty years old, and at level 8 he would only be more powerful cannon fodder in the army. It was unlikely that he would lead the troops personally. Thus, these three novices who had often offended people had been pushed into leadership.

The army only made its way into the town once their scouts confirmed multiple times that the invaders had left. They'd come with a renewed ambition to take over, and the knights were outraged when they learnt what Richard had done. They felt like the mayor and townsfolk had colluded with the invaders, using torture, arrests, and threats of violence to have them pay twice what they'd given Richard to prove their loyalty to the Baron. And unlike Richard, it went without saying that they wouldn't accept bribes and waive the taxes owed. If they didn't have powerful family or friends to back them up, the wealthier citizens had everything taken from them.

At the same time, all the adventurers who had stayed on in Joven

had been arrested. The dozen of them were marked as accomplices of Richard, and they would serve as the army's accomplishment on this deployment. There was some fighting and death in the process, but the sheer size of the army managed to detain most of them, bar a few who managed to get away.

The adventurers were of unknown origin to the three knights, and since they weren't citizens their deaths did not matter. They would be the best display of the army's might. Who was to say that they weren't the invaders' guides?

As for Joven, it was a fief with its lord gone. Kojo's family had been taken away by the invaders as well, and finding a suitable heir from his bloodline would be a long and arduous process. The Baron himself could find some reasons to take the land over. This left the town without a master, with anyone able to come and pillage it without repercussion. The lion's share of these 'taxes' would go to these knights and their subordinates, with the remainder heading to the Baron.

Having been heavily plundered, the citizens of Joven wondered how they would pass the cold, hard winter. Their main income was from adventurers, the military, tourists, and merchants. After this storm, no adventurers would dare to come to this barony any time soon. However, that was of no concern to the knights. Why would they care about the lives of people not under their charge? That was Kojo's responsibility.

Things were exactly as Richard had envisioned them.

Book 2, Chapter 31 - Reputation

Unlike Joven which had been plundered twice, Osfa had turned out to be much more fortunate. This tiny town that was closest to the mountains and the invaders' base hadn't been visited at all.

Joven's luck had been terrible both times, and in varying ways. However, Richard had gotten most of his gains from Kojo's estate and the training camp, with the tax he collected from the town itself being minimal. On the other hand, all of the money the baron's army collected had come from the town. At this point, it was difficult to tell who the town hated more.

It was Richard's intention to bypass Osfa. He pondered over things deeply, simulating the situation on the map countless times over before he decided to let off the closest, most probable supply point. He'd instead decided to lay his hands on the heart of Kojo's territory at Joven, and as expected they'd won in a single battle and achieved many of their fundamental goals.

From another point of view, not touching Osfa gave his enemies the misconception that they'd long since left their base, choosing another one instead. If they hadn't there would be no reason to avoid removing the thorn in front of their eyes.

Richard's army took advantage of the night, heading towards the mountains. They would reach the foot of the range by dawn, and with only a single village along their route it would be easy to hide their tracks. Of course, the ones leading the way were the defected troops who were familiar with the terrain.

By the time dawn broke, the group was already thirty kilometres from Joven, having travelled through a small forest to arrive at a lake at the foot of a mountain. They would reorganise themselves here, setting up camp. Richard's next plans were vague and incomplete for now, and would have to wait until he got news from Marvin.

The lake wasn't very large, but the water was clear. Its serene surface made it reflective, like one side of a polished sapphire. A few streams flowed into the lake from a short distance away, and at the banks it was like a patch of grassland. The warhorses had been loosened up, with the experienced soldiers bringing them to drink water and eat the grass.

Two carriages were parked by the lake. This was the furthest they could travel, for further ahead was the precarious mountain path that even horses would have trouble moving through. When the women and children who had suffered through the night alighted from the carriages, they all looked pale and unsteady, unable to remain on their feet. A few of the young, pretty ladies looked ready to faint any time, but when they realised that the ones who'd come to support them were two terrifying trolls they immediately shrieked, growing more alert and alive than anyone else.

Trolls were a powerful, intelligent race that also existed on this plane. They were famous for eating humans, be they male, female, young, or old. The captives had erupted into chaotic screaming, and were gathered up and forced to sit as they waited for the defected troops to build the camp.

Medium Rare was off helping these new soldiers cut trees, while Tiramisu set up a huge wok in preparation to cook his best meat stew. Richard found a shady spot and spread out his map on the grass, continuing to analyse their current situation and environment.

However, a message suddenly radiated in his mind, the broodmother's voice ringing out, "Master, I've discovered a camp of goblins. There are about two hundred of them, and I am preparing to clear it out."

"Alright," Richard answered, "Be safe."

Goblins were weak individually, about equal to a level 1 or 2

human on average. Even their most powerful were level 5 at best, but their strength lay in their fast breeding and adaptability to many environments. They were present on a lot of planes, but their existence here only meant this plane was even more similar to Norland. A camp of two hundred was considered small for the race, and these creatures were by nature the kind to disperse when they met a powerful opponent, unable to form an effective counterattack. Thus, Richard wasn't really worried about the broodmother's safety. It was a new day, and it already had three more enhanced raptors at its side ensuring its chances of victory were even higher.

However, the goblins and Richard's own observation of the surroundings over the past few days told him that this plane was far more abundant in food than even Norland itself, making the races more diverse as well. He picked up a pictorial bestiary from amongst the books he'd received from Joven, beginning to flip through it. These books to him were more important than thousands of gold. They would give him a better understanding of this plane, thus increasing his survivability.

But despite his confidence in the broodmother, Richard still kept watch over the general situation. His blessing of precision automatically labelled the creature with an image in his mind, a half-full bar next to it that had changed from blue to red. This bar represented the amount of energy the broodmother had in reserve, something that decided the number of drones it could produce.

The broodmother was over thirty kilometres away from Richard himself, and it only needed to take care of a little goblin camp. Thus, he didn't have his own raptors go over and help, instead having them disperse into the forest to capture their own food.

In the distance, Olar was busy writing a letter to Baron Forza under Flowsand's direction. While the elven bard still didn't have a good grasp of the new language, his understanding of art allowed him to write these completely foreign symbols out beautifully. The

content of the letter was simple: it was basically a demand for ransom, in exchange for the wives and children of Sir Kojo. If Baron Forza was willing to pay more for them than a slave trader would, then he could retain his dignity and reputation amongst his subordinates.

Richard knew that this letter was fated to come to naught. Even if the Baron was willing to pay the ransom, his own status as an invader from another plane made them fated enemies. There was nothing that could be done about that—the God of Valour had sent an oracle down, so trades of any kind with the invaders would be seen as disrespecting the gods.

Of course, Neian wasn't all-knowing, unable to be up to date on everything happening in the world at the same time. In truth, even the master of all gods was only close to being omniscient and omnipotent. Neian had eyes and ears in this territory through his clerics and priests. And while those eyes and ears could be muted for a while for a certain cost, that price would be far higher than what he lost if he refused to pay the ransom.

What Richard needed now was to hurt Forza's reputation. And that wasn't a hard task, given that it wasn't very high in the first place.

Within the forest, Waterflower had the Shepherd of Eternal Rest in her hand as she performed the same slashing motion again and again as if she did not know the meaning of fatigue. Gangdor was leaning by a large tree not far away, the axe by his side finally satiated with fresh blood. He watched on lazily as a few of the defected soldiers transported the wood he had just chopped to the side of the lake, for use as support for the camp.

“These guys work pretty hard,” Gangdor stated leisurely.

“I don't like them,” Waterflower answered without enthusiasm. All of a sudden, she performed a horizontal slash, speaking with a hint of bloodlust, “They actually hate us. If they get the chance,

they will murder us immediately.”

Gangdor shrugged and answered, “Most of them are cowards, and timid trash. Boss definitely knows that. He doesn’t need their respect, only enough fear to keep them obedient. The brave ones were already fed to my axe.”

Book 2, Chapter 32 - Reputation (2)

At that time, the broodmother was wiggling its heavy body across the forest. It possessed great strength, knocking down every tree in its path as it left a visible trail through the woods. Once the last tree fell with ado, the goblin camp came into clear view.

The camp took up the entirety of a hill, surrounded by a fence of branches that acted as a crude enclosure. It was littered with many crudely-built huts, and what made it strange was that there was a cave leading underground in it. Most goblins had grown used to living in caves— only the richest and most powerful of them had the luxury of staying in huts.

There were many goblins scurrying in and out of that cave. This wasn't just a camp with two hundred, it was a full-blown tribe with more than a thousand residents!

The attack began without much hesitation. The countless goblins screamed, brandishing all kinds of weapons as they rushed out of their camp. They went up against nine huge worker drones that were about a metre and a half long, with great offensive abilities alongside paralytic poison and razor-sharp blades. The workers killed a goblin with every movement they made, but alas the goblins won out in numbers. One of the workers was a split-second too slow to react, downed by a couple of goblins in an ambush. After that, ten more rushed over to it and buried it alive. The broodmother could feel its life being drained away in its consciousness.

A low-pitched rumble sounded in the forest, as three ferocious raptors charged towards the goblins. This time, it was a bloodbath. These were attack drones, specialised for combat unlike the workers who were meant to gather food. Their bladed front limbs could effortlessly cut a goblin apart, and coupled with their enhanced strength they could effortlessly dismember a few goblins in a strike. The raptors also possessed another deadly trait— their

abnormally large mouths. Their mouths were capable of ripping the strongest goblin into pieces without breaking a sweat.

The raptors had strong bodies, and were also very agile. The most these goblins could do was leave some superficial cuts, not doing much damage at all. Some of their attacks just missed with the sheer speed of the raptors.

With the raptors added into the fray, the goblin tribe suffered many casualties. What made things worse was the silhouette of the broodmother outside their camp. It was the last straw, shattering any confidence they had left, even though they had lost just over two hundred soldiers so far.

The goblins began to disperse in all directions, running into the forest where the sluggish broodmother could not catch up. All it could do was send out orders to the raptors and workers, having them split up and give chase. While goblins were weak at fighting, they were fast little creatures. With the limited number of raptors and worker drones, and having maintained a safe distance from the broodmother, they only suffered a hundred more casualties. This hunt had drawn to a close.

The broodmother continued its journey into the camp, paying no mind to all the food on the floor. It felt a very alluring presence from this goblin camp, an indescribable wave of spiritual power beckoning to it.

The fences guarding the camp may as well have been withered twigs. The broodmother passed over them with ease, making its way to the centre of the camp to stop at a stone which looked like an altar. This two-metre altar was the source of that inexplicable attraction— to the goblins, it would be considered a magnificent structure.

There was a stone statue erected on the altar, a depiction of a fully-armoured gnome carrying a gigantic axe with both its hands. It was carved intricately, seeming very lifelike completely unlike

the normal crude and messy sculptures of the goblins. It cut an imposing figure, exuding a faint aura of death. Goblins could not possibly produce such an exquisite piece of art, but here it was.

Ancestral worship! This statue was an idol of a goblin ancestor that this tribe worshipped, and also the thing that greatly attracted the broodmother. Nobody would have thought that goblins would practise such a thing.

The cracks and erosion on the statue suggested that it had suffered the wrath of nature for a long time, and was at least a few hundred years old. The goblins had worshipped it for that entire length of time, which was the reason it had manifested god-like powers. And those god-like powers were exactly what called out to the broodmother.

The broodmother propped itself up, opening its large mouth as wide as it could before it swallowed the statue with one big gulp. It didn't just stop there, however. It instead used the pincers on its mouth to cut the altar apart, the stone crumbling as though it was freshly baked bread. It then lazily picked up the fragments swallowing them as well. Even if it wasn't as much as with the statue, this altar possessed some faint divine power as well. It would not let anything go to waste.

Even as the broodmother quickly began digesting the statue, a sudden, blazing pain struck its body. This was the result of the divine powers being decomposed and absorbed.

“Broodmother, are you alright?” Richard's voice came immediately in its consciousness. He had felt its pain, and was voicing his concern.

“I'm fine, Master. I found an altar for ancestral worship at the goblin camp. It was just what I was looking for— a source of extraordinary energy. It can vastly improve my abilities, so I ate the whole altar. I just need some time, digesting such great power is challenging and painful.”

“An altar for ancestral worship? You can absorb divine power?” Richard was extremely surprised.

“Is this power divine? I don’t feel like it is as vast and esoteric as true divine power. I’m completely unable to absorb Miss Flowsand’s powers at all.”

Richard let out a laugh, “Flowsand possesses the power of the Eternal Dragon, and even powerful gods cannot match up to its powers. There may be greater powers in the countless planes, but we know nothing as of now. Anyway, what powers did you gain from the altar?”

“I haven’t fully absorbed its powers yet. For now, it just gives me more energy capacity,” the broodmother replied. Richard could also feel the energy bar of the broodmother expand in his mind, increasing steadily until it was a little more than a third larger than before. This meant that, if fed adequately, the broodmother could now maintain upto twelve raptors.

He also felt a hazy spot of light deep within the broodmother’s body, but he couldn’t discern what it was.

Once it had consumed the altar, the broodmother started on the rest of its meal. Its energy slowly increased.

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At a riverside, about ten kilometres away from the barony’s capital, was a scenic little town. This was Sir Kocat’s territory, known for its optimal location and plenty of local specialties. The mackerel from the river was fresh and delicious, a favourite amongst the dinner tables of nobility. With the wealth of his lands, Kocat had even managed to build a small castle.

The exterior was classical, with high walls and narrow windows. The interior, however, was extremely beautiful and extravagant. The rooms were also decorated tastefully, with style and comfort in mind. This was a palace, not meant for battle.

The upper section of the castle also broke off from tradition. A semi-circular balcony was suspended over the top, allowing the owner to admire the scenery in his spare time. This was well in line with the knight's style. He loved using gold and politics to deal with his enemies, not violence.

However, in the hall he loved the most, Sir Kocat was currently as angry as a lion. He paced back and forth relentlessly, but that did little to quell the rage in his heart. He swung out with his hand, sending an intricate vase flying to the wall where it shattered to pieces. The butler was startled upon hearing the broken vase, starting to tremble in fear without the courage to knock and ask if everything was alright. He tiptoed away, distancing himself from the door so he wouldn't hear something he wasn't supposed to.

Book 2, Chapter 33 - Seeking Help

“All invaders are demons! And even if they aren’t, they will be dealt with like they are. Anyone who associates with them will be treated like their allies, tied up at the church and burnt at the stake! You... How could you do such a thing?” Kocat raged, his voice deliberately low in fear of being overheard.

Marvin was sitting comfortably on the sofa opposite him, sipping on fragrant black tea. He waited for Kocat’s anger to subside a little before saying, “Father, I’m already working with these ‘demons.’ Come, have a look!”

He reached out his hand as he spoke, and a crimson flame suddenly appeared upon it. The flame was as dark as centuries-old blood. Although the flame didn’t last long, it still drained enough mana to leave Marvin pale, having him gasp for air.

Kocat was overwhelmed with shock. He took in a sharp breath, exclaiming, “Dark flame! You, you’ve become a fallen priest?”

“I’m only level 6, so I don’t qualify to be called a full priest yet. For now, I’m a fallen cleric,” Marvin corrected his father calmly.

“Who is the new god you’ve started to worship?” the knight asked frantically, his gaze unwavering.

“The Eternal Dragon,” Marvin replied before adding, “It isn’t a god from our plane.”

An unreadable expression overtook Kocat’s face, and he took a while to speak again, “This Eternal Dragon definitely has to be a powerful force, if it can channel its energy across planes.”

Marvin poured himself another cup of tea, “My dear father, I’m sure you understand now that I’m bound to the ‘demons’ henceforth, unable to separate myself from their camp. As for you, if it’s discovered that you’re the father of a fallen cleric, you will be burnt at the stake as well. Instead of this anger, wouldn’t it be

better for you to think of a way to get me out of this?

”These invaders evidently aren’t as weak as the priests made them out to be. Even though they’re young— twenty years of age at most— they have astonishing power. Think about this: a number of level 10 invaders, despite being ill-equipped, managed to completely annihilate an army led by Sir Menta and Sir Hubert! That’s two of the Baron’s titled knights!”

Sir Kocat groaned heavily, not saying a word. Marvin was his son — he naturally couldn’t lie. These intruders were clearly of high status in their own plane, and likely had great powers backing them.

Kocat paced up and down the hall relentlessly, eventually reaching a conclusion. “The Direwolf Duke might be able to help you solve the problem. His clan worships their ancestors, and is at odds with the God of Valour. I’ll write you a letter of recommendation that you can bring to Baron Fontaine, the Duke’s brother. He will be able to introduce you to the Duke.

“But...” he paused and looked at Marvin with concern, “The Direwolf Duke is notorious for his tyranny. You must be careful when dealing with him. If his mood grows bad, he might tear you to shreds!

“Also, here’s the map of Baron Forza’s castle you wanted. I can only help you so much. When you leave, take extra precaution not to let others recognise you.”

Marvin took the letter of recommendation from his father, carefully stowing the thick scroll away. He then bowed deeply, “Father, I have a premonition that you won’t regret your decision today.”

Kocat could only let out a snort to that, not knowing what to say. Even level 6 wasn’t much of a deal given his son’s age, and divination and prophecy were arts that could only be performed by true priests at level 12 and above. Such priests also had to have

great favour from their Lord to be able to adequately perform such spells. All this talk of premonitions was just nonsense.

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Around the same time, a vase more valuable than any of Kocat's possessions hit the wall in Baron Forza's study, shattering into a million pieces on the floor. The Baron was evidently dejected—even after wrecking the vase he pounded his table without end until he was left huffing and puffing.

His butler had been hiding in a corner throughout this tantrum. "My Lord," he finally managed once Forza's rage faded, "Priest Essien has been waiting on you for the past half hour."

Forza grunted heavily, trying to fix his disheveled hair as he slowly followed the butler to the hall. Essien was a priest who was already at level 12, and was the person who had coordinated his territory's rise in the divine ranks. Even in secular influence the man wasn't far off from Forza himself, and with the baron's army taking a significant blow that especially reduced his elites' fighting strength by more than half, the priest's own army of about thirty paladins had become a formidable force in the region.

Baron Forza had an alarmingly thin frame, and a head of white hair. Late nights for many days had left him with an ashen complexion, and with deep bags under his eyes. Upon entering the hall, the Baron saw Essien admiring an oil painting of the Goddess of Spring. He addressed the man, "Priest Essien, if you are here to ask for help with the invaders, I'm afraid there isn't much for us to talk about."

Essien managed a smile, seemingly unbothered by the Baron's cold demeanour. "My Lord," he responded, "I indeed am here to discuss that very matter. You know the oracle—"

"Don't talk to me about the oracle!" Forza raised his voice. "Only you know what it contains! If the intruders were as weak and insignificant as you made them out to be, and fewer than twenty in

number, how is it that the last three knights and the hundreds of elite troops I sent out were all defeated by them?”

Startled, Essien replied “The oracle is never wrong. As a priest who serves the God of Valour, that is something I could never lie about. There is only one reason for the way the battles turned out. If I were to put it bluntly, my Lord, you should train your troops properly.”

Forza grunted, looking uncomfortable, but he didn’t say a word. Essien was criticising him for powerless leadership, but when he’d received the battle report he himself could only conclude the same thing. But he was helpless now— the remaining two knights weren’t good at military matters, having been given their position due to social connections and blood ties. It wouldn’t be very useful to send them out to battle.

“My Lord, you are in quite the plight at the moment. My humble suggestion is that you promptly seek the assistance of Earl Jayleon. If you send a messenger now, he should be able to reach the Earl’s castle within three days. We might still be able to catch the invaders. You might be losing some money and reputation, but that is much better than the incident at Joven occurring once more.”

Forza replied coldly, “Even if the Earl accedes to my request, his troops will need at least ten days to get here. What will the church do until then?”

“I have already sent out a messenger to ask for help from the bigger church in the duchy.”

Essien’s reply stunned Forza for a moment. Turning to a bigger authority for help meant that Essien conceded to not being able to handle the matters of his region by himself, which would make it even more difficult for him to be promoted or to be given divine grace.

While he felt that Essien’s decision was a little peculiar as it

would put himself in a disadvantaged situation, it made Forza feel a little more at ease. He called upon his personal attendant to write a letter on the spot, and gave orders for this letter to be delivered to the Earl within three days.

Book 2, Chapter 34 - Agreement

By nightfall, the camp at the lakeside had fallen silent. Both the soldiers and their captives were thoroughly exhausted after the long, hard day, and they'd gone to bed early. The only ones full of energy were the three raptors, who'd just had a heavy meal. They took on patrol duty.

Richard meditated until he completely recovered his mana, before walking out of his tent and slowly wandering towards the lake.

Standing by the lake was the graceful silhouette of Flowsand. Even though she rarely meditated, it seemed like she could recover her mana just as fast as him. She was quietly gazing out at the lake, her thoughts a mystery. The Book of Time was hanging from her waist, glowing faintly that when coupled with the misty haze from the lake made her seem dreamy.

Richard walked over and casually asked, "What's on your mind?"

"You and I," her slightly hoarse voice was as lethal as ever.

Richard stopped, coughing a few times in an attempt to hide his awkwardness. Flowsand had an extraordinary charm, great enough to make him feel awkward with that dubious answer. He'd retreated a few times before, but this time he wouldn't back off from the exchange. He clarified, "What about us?"

"Our relationship."

Richard gritted his teeth and continued, "What relationship?"

However, he realised how stupid that sounded the moment the words left his mouth. This evidently surmounted to a type of defeat.

Flowsand turned around, gazing deep into Richard's eyes, "I've been thinking of how many years we can keep this up."

Her reply was really vague, and seemed to conceal another meaning. However, it was also possible that she meant nothing at all. Richard sighed, “Many. As long as we can survive.”

She let out a faint smile, “We will as long as you want us to.”

This made Richard curious, “You seem to be more confident in me than I am in myself.”

“You have a strange ability... The depths of the battlefield seem transparent to your gaze. What’s more, you also have your broodmother...”

She deliberately paused for a while before continuing, “And you have me.”

Everything she had said was correct. However, some of it was especially lethal. Looking at the priestess under the moonlight, Richard couldn’t help but think back to her body. It took a difficult struggle for him to control his desires, and he spoke sternly, “You’ve seen the information on our surroundings. The commoners aren’t necessarily hostile to us, we might even have an opportunity to work with the nobles. The only ones who truly want to destroy us here are the deities.”

Flowsand replied, “That goes without saying. Our presence here already violates the law of the planes, they will definitely try to get rid of us. However, even if you conquer the entire plane the nobles will still find a place in your regime.”

Richard nodded in agreement, “So we actually have a high possibility of finding good allies. There are two candidates. First is the Direwolf Duke in the west, who comes from a clan that believes in ancestral worship. And the other is Earl Oliver in the south. Rumours say he’s dabbled in the dark arts for almost twenty years, and he has numerous connections to the abyss. I’ve heard that he’s secretly created a pool of blood, frequently killing his prisoners to present them as offerings. It indicates that he’s trying to summon demons, and they definitely won’t be from this plane so they won’t

be in the same camp as the God of Valour.

“Most interestingly, neither territory is particularly far away, but they’ve still continued their existence. This means that they have enough capability that the church cannot just destroy them.”

“Indeed. A violent tyrant and a murderous maniac,” Flowsand hit the nail on the head.

Richard nodded, “We have no choice but to work with murderers and tyrants now.”

“Watch out for them. They may eat you alive!”

Richard laughed, “They can try. They’ll most likely break their teeth.”

The two continued to joke around for a while, something that finally allowed Richard to grow less tense. He gazed at the calm lake, saying, “Ah... I feel like it takes more time for me to increase my mana pool here.”

“That is normal. The greater the restrictions on power in a plane, the slower one grows as well. Primary planes don’t have many restrictions on power, which is the entire reason they’ve grown to their positions. To a certain extent, expeditions to lesser planes are a waste of your lifespan, exchanging time for resources. If your only ambition is power, you need to remain in your primary plane to hone your craft.”

“Oh... And before I forget, this plane only has two moons. Why can I still draw the powers of the seven moons when I use the secret swords?”

Flowsand shook her head, “That I don’t know. There are far too many mysteries in the planes, and my knowledge barely scratches the surface. The only things I know are from written accounts.

Richard let out a long sigh, “Alright, I understand now. I’ve had a few ideas recently, and a breakthrough in my research into fireballs...”

“Fireballs again! That spell is only good when you need to roast a pig!” Flowsand couldn’t help but let out a laugh that faded into a tight-lipped smile. Shrouded in the moonlight reflecting off the lake, she looked indescribably beautiful.

“No, there’s always room for improvement. I can now delay the spell by upto a second. If I launch three fireballs in a triangular formation, I should be able to delay them such that they explode together—” Richard immediately squatted down, scribbling on the ground by the lake.

Flowsand didn’t think anything of it at first, but after some deeper consideration her complexion rapidly changed. If Richard really could control the spells so well, then the target in the centre of that triangle wouldn’t just be a roasted pig. She hadn’t heard of anyone under the level of great mages who had such great control over their magic.

Richard continued rambling, but then he suddenly looked up to gaze at the distance. He then gasped in surprise.

“What is it?” Flowsand asked.

“It’s nothing, let us continue.” The broodmother had just informed him that it had discovered a valley inhabited by troggs. It had sealed the mouth off, and was preparing for a meal. Troggs were just like goblins, a community that could barely pass off as an intelligent species. While they weren’t as smart as even the goblins, however, their fighting strength was far superior. Richard had grown concerned for the broodmother for a moment, but he quickly dismissed it. It was capable of discerning the threat its prey posed.

Richard had just said a few words, before suddenly turning his attention towards the forest. He stood up, frowning, “It’s late. Why is Olar running towards the forest? The raptors are taking care of patrolling... Come, let’s have a look.”

Book 2, Chapter 35 - Agreement (2)

Flowsand nodded, stretching her hand out towards Richard. She pointed first at him and then at herself, divine energy flowing into their bodies that froze the external forces around them. As long as they remained silent, they could now avoid the detection of even the most seasoned of scouts.

She then cast a spell that allowed them to blend in with the nature, something akin to what was used by the druids who worshipped the Goddess of the Forest. Any organism under the effects of this spell would blend into the woods perfectly. Even if they touched the trees and leaves, the result would just sound like the wind or any other natural noise.

Flowsand had casually displayed something special about herself, but Richard noticed nothing strange. He didn't have experience with the priestesses of the Eternal Dragon.

The two became one with the dark forest, stealthily heading in Olar's direction. With the magical contract in place, the elven bard couldn't hide his position from Richard's mind. He'd been in the same part of the forest for a few minutes now.

Richard had felt that was strange at the beginning, but then he had a hunch that something may be happening that made him hesitant about getting any closer. However, Flowsand would bump into him whenever he slowed down, her faint breath blowing onto his neck. She would gently push against his back, urging him to go further. The priestess couldn't feel the movements of the elf.

As they closed in on the foot of a hill, the night wind was really strong. The wind whistled loudly past the forest, covering any other noise. However, Richard felt like the atmosphere had changed, growing increasingly ambiguous. The physical contact with Flowsand was growing ever more distinct, and thoughts of her body started to appear in his mind. He tried controlling

himself, but it was to no avail.

The elven bard didn't venture quite far into the forest, so the two managed to catch up very quickly. There were a few other strange sounds apart from the wind now, the voices of Olar and someone else. Richard slowly lowered the dense bush and branches in front of him, looking ahead.

Ten metres away, the elf was holding tightly onto a woman as he fiercely rammed into her body again and again. At the same time, he was using his melodious voice to whisper sweet nothings into her ear. The woman had her back against a tree, her arms wrapped around the bard's neck while her legs held tightly to his waist. Outside of what the tree supported, all of her weight was on Olar.

She was in pure ecstasy, each moan louder than the last. The elf reminded her to keep her volume down, so she buried her head into his collar and proceeded to bite his shoulder. Muffled noises escaped her throat, making it seem like she was crying and in great pleasure at the same time.

This aroused the elf further, and his thrusts increased in intensity until the woman's body began to spasm violently. Under the night sky, her dazzling white legs repeatedly coiled and twisted.

"Damn!" Richard cursed softly. He would never have expected to see such a thing. If this were any other day, he would not have minded admiring such sights for a while, but now that Flowsand was behind him, how would he have the cheek to watch on? Flowsand's presence wouldn't let him watch on in peace, and he was starting to feel some uncontrollable reactions.

The worst thing was that Flowsand put her entire weight onto his back, leaning over his shoulders just enough to watch the frantic display.

"Olar and... Ah, the knight's mistress... What are they doing...? Oh, I understand now." The hoarse voice sounding next to his ear

made it even harder for Richard to control himself, and he was on the verge of crumbling.

The elf continued its battle with the woman's flesh with a rigorous degree that was unimaginable. It appeared that his strength vastly exceeded its handsome exterior.

Richard had had enough. He could no longer fight against both his sexual urges and what was happening in front of him, so he got ready to stand up and shout for the elf to stop. It would be easy enough to find a reason for that— liberties couldn't be taken with the prisoners, at least not by the elf.

Flowsand seemed to have sensed what Richard was about to do, so she used her weight to pin him down, saying gently, "Don't move. Let us continue to watch, I've never seen something like this before."

Richard couldn't control his urges any longer, his manhood reaching its limit. He turned his hand over with an angry cry, grabbing Flowsand's breasts and groping them hard.

In response, the priestess only grunted out an affirmative.

The elf and woman were gyrating vigorously, reaching orgasm. However, they seemed to stay there for an especially long time. It looked like the bard wasn't just naturally gifted; he'd gone through rigorous special training to be so effective in 'combat.'

In this amorous moment, Richard felt especially exhausted instead. It took a long time for the bard to stop, and by then the woman had grown limp as mud, softly hanging onto him. They quickly put their clothes on, leaving in a hurry. Olar continued his sweet nothings along the way, making promises in his singsong voice. Whether he would make good on them was anyone's guess.

Richard and Flowsand remained in position, not moving an inch. The bard was done with play, and he'd returned to reality. He was a good scout, and it would be awkward if they were discovered.

Since Richard hadn't stepped out to stop them earlier, it would be even more inappropriate to be found out now.

Once Olar had left, there was a renewed calm in the forest. Richard suddenly grabbed Flowsand and pinned her to the ground, grabbing her robes at the collar and pulling them down to her waist in one forceful motion. This exposed her amber nipples, further enhancing Richard's lust.

Flowsand looked at the youth who was grinding his teeth, gently squeezing his arm as she whispered, "Ravage me, and there is no turning back. Think before you act."

"What is that supposed to mean? Are you telling me that the priestesses of the Eternal Dragon need to remain pure?" Richard asked. The small, cold hand rested on his own, sending his blood surging violently throughout his body.

"No, there is no such thing. However, I can tell you confidently that starting a sexual relationship with me is going to be very troublesome, more than you could ever imagine. At the same time, I myself am a very troublesome person as well, if you treat me as just a women. But treat me as a priestess, a reliable companion, and you will not be disappointed or burdened. On the contrary, I can help you solve a lot of issues." Flowsand rarely spoke this much.

Richard seemed undeterred by her speech, ripping her robes off completely to show her naked legs. He then positioned himself before speaking, "You're clearly trying to provoke me. I'm not someone who fears trouble, and if I want to prove that my only option here is to eat you up. I don't know if we'll ever make it back to Norland, so there is no need for me to consider issues of the future."

Flowsand gently said, "We may die tomorrow anyway, so let's just have some fun before we do? Is that it? You can drop the gentlemanly act now!"

Flowsand's words were like a cold shower over his head. Richard had been prepared to begin, but he ended up holding for a full minute as he thought over it.

He suddenly seemed to understand something, exclaiming, "I will survive, and I will bring you all back to Norland. One night before we head back, I'll eat you up."

Flowsand smiled faintly, speaking in a gentle voice, "Alright, then. I will resist when that time comes."

This sentence caused Richard to tremble, and he almost couldn't stop himself from penetrating her body.

Book 2, Chapter 36 - Reprisal

Richard was full of fresh energy as he walked out of the forest with Flowsand, no longer feeling like this plane was perpetually shrouded in grey. He thought back deeply on his relationship with her, finding that it was full of accidents and mistakes.

On the eve of returning to Norland... That wasn't just a promise he had made, it was an agreement between the two. However, how was he to get to that step?

He kept thinking it over on the road, but couldn't come to a clear conclusion. This was a problem even his gifted intellect couldn't solve, so engaging even the broodmother's messages didn't come to his attention.

'I've already captured the troggs. Two-thirds of the prey escaped.' That was news from ten minutes ago.

'I'm having the third batch of raptors continue to follow me, it will increase hunting efficiency.' That was five minutes ago.

'Found the nest of a whiteback devilbear.' One minute ago.

Lost in his own thoughts, Richard didn't even notice the sheer increase in the broodmother's hunting, and that it was only giving him news of the difficult targets. Perhaps it was just as it had said before, and the mountains really didn't have any natural predators for it to be wary of.

Returning to camp, Richard finally ceased his thoughts on what transpired just earlier and put out his manhood. However, it felt extremely uncomfortable and he ended up unable to sleep, instead continuing to study his map. It felt like the twists and turns of the night had expanded his plane of thought, and his eyes began to trace back and forth along a series of small towns on the map.

Time passed quietly. Although Richard and Flowsand both acted as though nothing had happened, Olar seemed to be aware of

something. He didn't engage with Kojo's mistress again, although he still took the opportunity while on shift to give her some extra food. However, Richard pretended not to see that.

Noon of the third day, Marvin returned to the lakeside camp. The schematic of Baron Forza's castle came as a surprise to Richard—while the fallen cleric was terrible at the divine, he was not without merit. He was a master of conspiracy and negotiation.

After some thinking, Richard decided to take the letter of introduction from Sir Kocat, going to Baron Fontaine to see if he could get in touch with the Direwolf Duke.

On the fourth day, Gangdor brought back the news Richard had been waiting for. Forza refused to pay a ransom for Sir Kojo's family, even publicly executing Richard's messenger. The corpse was hung high up on the entrance to Joven, with a sign set up prominently next to it. Written on the sign was a warning in crimson blood: anyone who dared collaborate with the demons would suffer the same fate.

The news quickly spread through the temporary camp. The captive women and children immediately burst into tears, not stopping until several knights shouted in a bid to silence them. The soldiers had more varying expressions, but most of them were shocked into silence while a few were whispering to their neighbours.

The area was filled with an oppressive air of despair. These men had never been fearless, at least not in front of the enemy. Now there was no way to retreat, and faced with the terrifying might of Baron Forza and Earl Jayleon they naturally lost all colour in their faces.

“What do we do now, boss?” Gangdor asked casually, not caring that his voice resonated across the entire camp.

“What do we do?” Richard laughed, “What else can we do? Of course we're going to teach Forza a lesson he won't forget! And on

the way, we'll find more distinguished and beautiful ladies to take as companions!"

Richard immediately started assigning roles, leaving only two knights and ten soldiers to guard the captives. Everyone else left the camp, their first destination being Joven with the veteran Yomen leading the way. The forces were strangely silent as they marched along, everyone aware of Richard's unusual determination and bloodlust.

However, anyone who knew Richard as a person would know he wasn't angry for that one soldier's death. He'd already estimated that anyway. Thus came the question: how had this change come about?

That question was near impossible to answer.

Following the troops were nine raptors. Seeing these savage beasts move silently caused even Gangdor to tense up unnaturally, the only ones unaffected being Flowsand and Waterflower. Flowsand knew the origins of the broodmother, while Waterflower sensed no hostility from these creatures.

Nine in the evening was a time when most people in remote villages went to sleep. Joven's inns were still lively, but the houses had no lights coming from them anymore. These days, even families not in the habit of sleeping early shut their doors and blew out the lights early.

The Baron had stationed almost a hundred soldiers in Joven. Although these energetic fighters were helpless against monsters, they were good at oppressing and bullying the townsfolk. The core epithet of this plane's government was that people fulfilled their obligations to their lord while the lord had the responsibility to protect his people. With the lord missing and his family kidnapped, the town was free for the taking.

'I hope you will not let me down when I return...' When the bloodshed and screaming began once more, more than one

resident of Joven recalled Richard's words. Those words were still ringing in their ears, but nobody had expected him to return so quickly.

However, things were different from his first time here. The people now felt a little relieved, some even overjoyed, except they found it difficult to express. At least they could witness these soldiers receive a proper lesson.

Nearly a hundred soldiers still posed some amount of threat to Richard's army, even if they were only ordinary warriors without a single knight among them. Even their leader was only level 6, but as an army they were relatively complete. If the infantry and archers could take advantage of the town's defences, it would cause them some trouble.

However, such trivial obstacles never came to be. They weren't prepared to fight, and more than half the soldiers were drunk in the tavern. When Richard rushed in with his men, they weren't even able to escape. It was a massacre.

A third of the soldiers were captured, another third killed, while the remainder fled. Richard had anticipated this when he called the attack, having grown more capable now of reading the battlefield. As long as he had enough information, the results wouldn't deviate much from his expectations.

However, those who fled were not fortunate. In the dark fields were nine raptors, and Richard had decided to let only ten go. They would spread the news everywhere, letting Forza know that he had returned.

The so-called battle had ended as soon as it began. Richard's army had struck down ten men like they were falling leaves, and the rest of them had completely collapsed. Even the thirty deaths total was mostly because a certain few people couldn't restrain their violence, Richard himself being one of the culprits.

The first thing he'd done when he rushed into the barracks was

to cast a fireball with a five second delay. Even though he'd immediately felt that something wasn't right, absorbing the second one before he could cast it, the delayed explosion lit a patrolling squad head on and lit them aflame. Of course, Gangdor and the trolls were savage as well, every swing of their weapons taking the lives of several men.

Joven was occupied once again. Now, none of the townsfolk dared to go out onto the streets, and Richard simply called for someone to take down the corpse of the executed soldier and burn the Baron's signpost. They left quietly with their prisoners, leaving only the dozens of bodies and a strong stench of blood.

While the Baron's territory was not small, all major towns were connected by road. Fast horses could reach the capital in under three hours, and there were enough escaped soldiers to bring news of his real power to the Baron.

However, the commander overseeing the standing army refused to dispatch forces to provide assistance. He insisted on waiting for the Baron's command, or at least for dawn to send troops.

However, dawn? By then, the demons would have fled far away. The Baron had ordered that he not be disturbed while he slept, since he hadn't rested well recently. Any matters would have to be discussed with the butler, and any intelligent people would know to ignore the light coming from Forza's study room window.

Book 2, Chapter 37 - Retribution

While the higher-ups under Forza were searching for a reason to stay put, Richard had already found his way to a different manor. A fireball sent the place's main security, composed of several strong, young soldiers, straight to their graves. He then calmly pointed forth from up on his horse, and a group of soldiers with only shields and swords rushed in.

These were the prisoners who'd surrendered earlier in the night, given weapon and shield but no armour to protect them. However, most of the defenders had been swept away by Richard, so the chaotic mob managed to overrun any resistance with sheer numbers.

The lord of the manor, an elegantly dressed knight, finally appeared, but he'd spent too much time putting on his full body armour. Gangdor and Waterflower saw him as he entered the battlefield imposingly, and a minute later he had been taken prisoner.

Half an hour later, Richard moved out with a large number of troops once more. They passed through two other manors, capturing the knights that ruled them before finally arriving at their destination at dawn. This was Woodtown, Sir Menta's home. Now, Kojo's wife would have several peers of similar status alongside her.

Once they'd captured Woodtown, Richard left the soldiers and captives who were too tired to continue behind. He had two mounted knights escort them back to camp, alongside two raptors, while he himself took the team from Norland and headed to Sir Hubert's territory of Sequoia Town. A true battle broke out there, with more than thirty guards and warriors from knighted lineages joining the desperate struggle. As valiant as their sacrifices were, however, they were completely in vain. Flowsand's presence had rendered them unable to severely wound even a single one of their

foes.

With Sequoia Town captured, Sir Hubert's family was taken prisoner as well. A total of 28 guards had been slain, shrouding the town in an atmosphere of deep sorrow that won Richard's respect.

However, there would be nothing more. Richard left the place at a predetermined time, not delayed in the slightest. The desperate resistance had left them little time for looting.

Within a single day Richard had taken out half of the Baron's forces, capturing three knights, killing one that refused to surrender, and even making off with two of the dead titled knights' wives. If it was just one family, Forza could still feign ignorance. However, with three households raided, not doing anything would be the end of his reign.

After raging for an entire afternoon, the Baron finally sent out his standing army to pursue the invaders. Five hundred soldiers left his capital at dusk, led by five knights as they rushed to Joven to attack the invaders who had already moved on. Forza was not a genius, but he wasn't stupid—he knew that the numbers of his men did not make up for their skill. In the meanwhile, the invaders' strength was quite clear. They had at least fifteen strong warriors that were more powerful than his knights, and a mage nearing level 10.

A damned mage!

Mages in this bountiful hinterland were even rarer than priests and shamans. Any mage close to level 10 would be more esteemed than the baron himself. Such high status did not just come out of their destructive prowess on the battlefield—there were many goods and equipment that only a mage could acquire. Things such as magic equipment and enchantments were very valuable.

Because of such prestige, power, and wealth, many wanted to become mages. However, the traditions of this plane placed heavy emphasis on one's lineage, with the requirements on one's

ancestry being extremely strict. A mage around level 10 could only accept around 10 apprentices, with no guarantee as to how much these apprentices would be able to learn. Thus, any aristocratic family with the means, even royal families as well, gave any of their children who had the slightest aptitude over to these veterans, filling up that limited quota. Even if some commoners had greater talent, many never had a chance to step foot into that world.

Over time, these traditions reinforced the scarcity of mages and made them even more valuable. And the more valuable they became, the more scarce they were. The invaders had a powerful mage on their side! This threat was greater in Forza's eyes than the rest of the invaders combined. There was a saying on this plane—only a mage could deal with a mage.

Of course, the one who'd come up with that saying was a mage himself. But his status as a grand mage made the saying unquestionable.

While priests, clerics, and powerful warriors could match mages in theory, without many battles to analyse there weren't many efficient tactics for such confrontations here. The accepted practice was to find a way to exhaust the opponent's mana before they tried to kill him.

Forza may have had the funds to build a church to the God of Valour, but he couldn't afford a level 10 mage. He'd asked for help from Jayleon because the Earl had three mages at level 10 or higher. That would be the most traditional of tactics, using a mage to deal with another.

Forza was counting the days in his ornate, beautiful study. It would take five days at the latest for the Earl's reinforcements to arrive, and if he was lucky the vanguards could make it here in two. At that moment, he would be safe.

However, the cost of such safety caused Forza to shudder. Earl

Jayleon was infamous for his greed, and surely hadn't passed up the chance to extort a heavy price. Having lost nearly all his fighting forces, Forza had been in no position to bargain. He would lose at least five knights' worth.

That wasn't just the land, taxes, and manpower. It was also five powerful, loyal, knights.

Had he known such a day would come, Forza would never have provoked these 'insignificant' invaders. The word had a precise definition amongst oracles, indicating that the invaders weren't higher than level 10. However, these very 'insignificant' people could cause losses great enough to threaten him and his knights.

Forza regretted the choice to use force. The much wiser option would have been to give them some benefits, and a map that led them to the Direwolf Duke. If not that, at the very least the church's paladins should have formed the main force. Forza hadn't had a good night's sleep in a few days. Dark blue eyebags were already hanging from his fleshy face.

One could look down on the city harbour from the Baron's study. The lighthouses and the Church of Valour were the most eye-catching buildings in the night, with a magnificent beacon tower taller than even the lighthouses themselves built in the church building. The beacon was lit whenever an oracle was received, or during a festival. The brilliant light would be visible for miles, and would not be extinguished for ten days.

Forza subconsciously gazed up at the magnificent church, and suddenly found the dancing flames blinding. He snorted heavily, pulling his curtains closed to prevent all light from entering his window. His only prayer now was that his army would not encounter the invaders, for he was extremely clear as to what such an encounter would bring about.

The vicious intruders could break the morale of these normal warriors with a single flurry of blows. There was an untold reason

he had sent his soldiers out at night— should they scatter, more of them would be able to escape under the cover of darkness. Such was Baron Forza's last military maneuver.

The prayer was only partly effective. His men had barely left the barracks, walking only five miles when they were discovered by a prowling raptor that immediately sent a telepathic message to Richard who was far away.

A knight had discovered the beast in the long grass, but had taken it to be an unknown monster that had descended from the mountains. He had no interest in hunting at the time, only thinking of swiftly bringing his troops to Joven and guarding it. The Baron had given him a secret missive before he left— explaining to him that his only task was to safely wait out these last few days before the Earl's reinforcements arrived.

The beast seemed reluctant, and tailed the troops from afar for nearly two miles before disappearing into the night.

Book 2, Chapter 38 - Attack

Forza's army made it all the way to Joven without incident, making the knight leading them feel like the journey was unusually smooth. He didn't know that the raptor fleeing into the night had made Richard well aware of his route, and that the mage had no plans to ambush him. There were more pressing goals than the 500 warriors.

At that very moment, Richard was standing at the top of a small hill that overlooked a flourishing city. With a population of over ten thousand, it could be called a large city even in Norland. With the fertility of this plane and humans being in a dominant position, the plane had more of an urban population than Norland itself.

There were about 500 more soldiers guarding the city, led by a titled knight. However, these soldiers were mostly level 1 or 2, comparable to ordinary men who were blessed with natural strength.

He marked the positions the raptor had sent back on a map, making a line that roughly led towards Joven. Rough calculations told him that the Baron's army would require about two hours to reach Joven.

He then turned back to face the people resting in various positions on the hill, proclaiming, "We will rest for another hour. After that, be prepared to strike immediately!" Even if the five hundred soldiers were quite mediocre, they could still be a threat on their home ground in the heat of battle.

Olar whistled, "My lord, please be gentle with any beautiful girls. Try to keep them alive!" The elf's words drew a knowing smile from the men in the group, while Flowsand and Waterflower remained expressionless as if they'd heard nothing.

Richard smiled, ignoring the elf's idle talk. He instead

concentrated his mind on giving the raptors orders, having them return from their patrols. This was what had allowed him to know the army's position when they left camp, and by the same link the raptors could find him as well. Already comparable to level 6 warriors, the darkness and chaos would make their bestial senses useful, increasing their effectiveness in the upcoming battle.

Half an hour later, all the raptors were back at Richard's side. The broodmother had sent some information back as well— the bears had been destroyed.

Richard was startled for a moment. It had six raptors assisting it, so taking this long to take out a single nest was questionable. The broodmother alone could take down those equivalent to knights already.

However, now was not the time to ponder. It was ten in the night, the scheduled time to attack. A majority of the people in the port city were already fast asleep, and all the people who were out to make merry were more or less drunk. There wouldn't be more than fifty guards on patrol, with the rest back at camp or at home, resting.

Richard waved his hand, and the party began to sneakily advance towards the port. The city had strengthened its defences given the circumstances, but in Richard's point of view it was still like they had no defences at all.

Medium Rare was hidden under a section of the wall, sending the elf and three knights over the top. The walls were only five metres tall, so the troll could just raise his arms to send a person on top. In fact, Waterflower and Gangdor had caught on to the edge in one leap before vaulting over, while Richard just cast a floating spell and made his way directly up the side.

A hundred metres away, a squad of soldiers was lazily patrolling the city wall. Richard swiftly motioned forward, and Waterflower immediately rushed over with the Shepherd of Eternal Rest in

hand. Her bare white feet made no sound against the floor as she disappeared into the shadows like a ghost.

The patrolling guards had been focused on the streets, with almost nobody looking at the tall walls. Waterflower had stuck to the walls as she charged across the dozens of metres separating them, and by the time the two leading the team looked at her she was already speeding past them. They couldn't even make a sound before her blade had sent five heads flying into the sky.

Richard's pupils contracted as he looked at the spurt of fresh blood, and the smell of death increased in the air. He took large strides towards the city gates, with Olar, Gangdor, and the knights rushing forth before him. But the young lady had already rushed out from another guard tower nearby, stalking another team of guards. The sword softly hissed in the air a few times, and she walked back without incident. Once the few drops of blood fell off the tip of her blade, one would notice nothing but her beautiful, well-defined face. None would realise what she had just done.

Gangdor begrudgingly slowed down, there was no use of him rushing over when Waterflower had taken care of everything on her own. The big axe in his hand seemed destined not to see action for a while. Olar and the infantry, in the meanwhile, went down the city walls to move the obstacles out of the way before they opened the gates.

The trolls brought the warhorses to the city gate, while the raptors followed quietly behind. Richard and the others mounted, facing the wide passage that led to the city that housed the grand church to the God of Valour.

The first thing someone new to this city would notice was the magnificent church. Atop the church building was a large axe, held by a hand that faced the sky. On top of that was a lighted torch, burning with passion. This was Richard's goal for tonight.

The Baron's territory was in its most vulnerable state, and the

standing army had all been sent away. Mobilising them again would require half a day of work, and there were only four powerful knights left in the land that were all in Forza's castle. No matter what happened in the port itself, the Baron would likely keep his own safety in mind and not deploy the two that were guarding him.

And thus, the only resistance Richard would face were two knights, Priest Essien and two more priests around level 8, thirty paladins, less than a hundred squires, and a few hundred militia. He'd done his best to disperse the Baron's forces, causing massive casualties in the port. He had to make full use of the destruction—it would be hard to get another such chance in the future. If he continued to put things off, more powerful enemies would converge on him.

Looking at the distant church with the nameless sword in his hand, Richard suddenly felt a burning sensation from his chest. This would be his first major assault against a powerful enemy.

“Attention! Our target this time is the Church of Valour. Let's make quick work of it, charge!”

Book 2, Chapter 39 - Attack (2)

Richard spurred his horse on, and they picked up their pace as they galloped swiftly towards the church that was a distance away. The fragmented sounds of the hooves hitting the ground resounded throughout the area, causing hearts to race.

A man peeked out through the blinds of a house on the road, trying to make sense of the commotion all around him. He gasped in surprise at the sight, immediately covering his mouth when he realised he'd let out a noise. He then shut his windows tightly, slumping to the floor without the ability to stand back up.

The ground shook with another rumble, the two trolls behind the army charging forward with big strides. There were shadows passing between the buildings on the sides of the road as well, the nine raptors flanking around from the side quickly. They displayed great agility as they leapt through rooftops and dark alleys.

The raptors were different from normal beasts. They had a certain level of intelligence, and Richard could give them some simple commands like have them stay close to each other, roam freely, stop and observe, or attack enemy targets.

When the church was less than half a kilometre away, Richard kicked his horse again. The sound of hooves against the ground intensified, like muffled thunder before a storm. Two intoxicated youths stepped out of a brightly lit tavern, dressed in army uniform and looking like they were supposed to be on nightly patrol. They looked out at the streets to see what had disrupted their merry-making.

Seeing the warhorses bounding towards him, one of the drunk men uttered in complete shock, "My goodness, what are those?!"

The other one, a little more sober now, saw the menacing silhouette of the trolls in the distance, "THEY'RE THE BEASTS FROM ANOTHER PLANE! GOD, THEY'VE ACTUALLY MANAGED

TO ENTER THE CITY. HURRY, WE NEED TO RAISE THE ALARM! QUICK—”

Before he could continue, an arrow from the dark pierced his throat. The remaining words never came out, and even as his swaying partner tried to make sense of the situation a mounted knight charged over like a gust of wind. He hacked the man’s head off with his one-handed axe, sending it flying into the air.

The troop continued to gallop past the tavern door, and with the two trolls following them the guests were completely shaken, quelling any ideas they had of stepping outside. They closed the doors in a panic, putting all the light out.

The church was now within view. Atop the stairs leading to the building were two knights standing tall like statues, both dressed in elaborate gold outfits. Truth be told, they were actually just squires— it was only on guard duty that they had the chance to be armed completely like the church’s paladins.

Richard kept his sword by his side, charging all the way up the steps without hesitation. The guards had already discovered them — one raised his greatsword with both arms, while the other shouted loudly to warn of the invaders.

Whoosh! Another two arrows flew out from behind Richard, hitting the two guards. The one who had shouted to alert the rest was hit in the face, falling down, but the other managed to ward it off with his sword. Olar wasn’t a professional archer— the faster he shot, the weaker and less accurate his arrows became.

However, the troops on both sides overtook Richard, charging up the steps all the way to the entrance of the church. They used the momentum of the charge to slam their swords into the guard, causing him to tumble backwards. Two red gashes appeared on his chest, red blood gushing out. He fell back against the door with a dull thud, before collapsing onto the ground.

It was only now that an alarm began to ring loudly. It was loud

and filled with a sense of urgency, undoubtedly waking every sleeping soul in the city. Even Forza, who'd just laid down on his bed, sat up with a start. His face turned pale, and his heart almost jumped out of his chest. He ran towards the window, pulling apart the curtains to see fires raging in the direction of the church.

"This... the church is under attack by the intruders?" Forza could not believe his eyes.

The church gates were tall and grand, but they weren't particularly built for defense. The two trolls managed to crush them with a few powerful strikes, and Richard used the chaos and dust cloud to take a few steps forward and begin chanting. Two fireballs flew into the church in quick succession less than three seconds later, leaving it buzzing with alarm and chaos. None of the guards could make it in time to ward off the attack.

Richard's line of sight was obstructed by the dust cloud, but that didn't matter. The spells had been cast as intended, and they were far from a shot in the dark. Based on the intel he'd received, if they weren't blocked they would land right in front of the altar, suppressing the church's divine power. In the partially sealed space, the fireballs could exhibit great power.

"Tiramisu, Medium Rare, the rest of you, that way!" Richard pointed towards the right side of the church. The trolls, two knights, and Olar swiftly moved out, rushing towards the paladins' housing in the distance. The raptors dashed forward as well, a sea of black rushing across the floor.

Waterflower took advantage of the chaotic situation, keeping close to the wall as she stealthily crept into the church. On the other hand, Gangdor barged in with his large axe in hand.

"TREMBLE, WEAKLINGS!" he howled, a knight with a huge shield following right behind to defend him if needed. This was a habit developed through numerous battles; after all, Gangdor's eye-catching build and the fact that he was loud left him easy to

notice on the battlefield.

Richard and Flowsand entered the church as well, seeing six fully-armoured paladins charging out from the pillars on both sides. Richard's eyes shrunk, "How are there so many?"

It was late in the night, and all the paladins should have been resting. There had to be three or four taking guard duty at most, but six fully-armoured paladins had appeared at the time. However, one look at the situation near the altar told him why exactly this was the case.

Even though the damage to the building itself didn't seem all that extensive from the outside, the scene in front of him perfectly showcased the destructive capabilities of his tactic. The damage was even greater than he had expected, leaving a sea of destruction before the altar. There were seven or eight dead bodies scattered around, and the statue of Neian leant precariously to one side, the entire surroundings bathed in magic flames.

It seemed like the attack had interrupted some kind of secret ceremony. There were only a few seconds between the doors breaking down and the advent of the fireballs, and with the first one having a delayed explosion the damage had been dealt at the same time. This had left the officials who were performing the rites with nowhere to run to, completely defenceless against the flames.

Book 2, Chapter 40 - The Priest

However, one man was left standing amongst this messy pile of corpses. A man who had a very majestic appearance.

He was of average build, but his sturdy body stood tall like a steel tower. His red robes were glowing with a holy light that even his shiny bald head seemed to emit. He had a prominently thick, short moustache, and his right hand held a bulky shortstaff with a valuable white crystal radiating divine power atop it.

Even if he didn't recognise the iconic red moustache, the sheer power this man was radiating would tell Richard who he was. He was the priest of this branch of the Church of Valour, Essien.

All of the clergy that had participated in the ceremony had died to Richard's fireball, but Essien hadn't been harmed at all. He had relied on the protection of his magnificent divine powers, but he hadn't been able to react in time to protect his comrades.

Essien glared at Richard, raising and pointing his staff towards the mage as he exclaimed loudly, "Hideous monster from another plane! Your greed and audacity will bring you endless suffering..."

Essien's first words were already deafening, his voice as loud as thousands of people shouting in unison. A strange phenomenon occurred even before he could complete his words, the tilted statue of Neian slowly returning to its original position.

An indescribable fear suddenly hit Richard, and Flowsand suddenly yelled from behind, "Don't let him finish! My powers are suppressed!"

Waterflower avoided a paladin to throw herself towards the priest, but Richard immediately yelled out, "Waterflower! Come back!" She was startled, but obedience was already an instinct so she flipped around in the air as she returned to the paladin. The Shepherd of Eternal Rest slammed directly into his unprotected

face.

A fireball shot out of Richard's hands, aimed at Essien's left rear. It landed without exploding, spiralling continuously in place as the destructive energies within grew increasingly violent. This was another delayed fireball!

Essien's pupils shrank, but he remained still as he furiously continued his chant. The holy power that had built up in the church for years was stirred by his voice, continuously gathering in front of his staff. The crystal began to emit milky white light that grew stronger and stronger, as if thunder was about to erupt.

Another fireball whistled past him, landing behind and to his right, but even this did not explode. However, a mere second later a third headed his way. This one landed right in front of him, but it wasn't delayed. The three fireballs formed a perfect triangle with Essien right in the middle.

Essien raised his fiery eyebrows, and it looked as if his heart had stopped beating. No more sound came out of his wide open mouth, everything suppressed as the only thing in the hall seemed to be the ringing of the magical explosions.

BOOM! The three waves of fire broke out at the same time, a wave of heat sweeping through the church. The two paladins nearest to the fire were sent flying back, and even if Richard was outside the church his robes were pulled close to his body. He clenched his teeth, resisting the dizziness from the sudden drain on his mana as a fourth fireball formed in his hands, also shooting out with a sizzle.

A thick, bright beam of light burst out from the centre of the explosions, spreading out to extinguish the magic flames. Essien's figure was revealed when everything dispersed, still standing tall in front of the altar with his staff raised. Although there wasn't any holy light around him anymore, he was so majestic it seemed like the God of Valour had descended himself.

The priest turned to look at the hideous monster from another plane, but all he could see was a spinning ball of fire heading his way. It slowly grew larger, eventually completely filling his field of vision!

Boom! Another wild explosion rang out, followed by a raging voice, "I CURSE YOU ALL!"

Essien's body was tossed into the sky, crashing heavily into the statue of Neian and tilting it once more. A deafening roar sounded as the statue slowly collapsed, several divine rays flashing from Essien's body in the middle of the rubble. The priest leapt up, dashing through the back door of the church as he disappeared into the night.

Richard was caught by surprise, only able to watch on as Essien escaped. This fight had taught him a lot about the survivability of a high priest—having launched six consecutive fireballs, he was too drained to pursue the priest.

With the priest gone, the six paladins all around level 8 weren't his opponents anymore. Flowsand managed to heal the injuries on Gangdor and the rest, although still only able to cast normal healing spells. Even with the source of its power destroyed the church still suppressed her abilities, and if not for the Book of Time she wouldn't even be able to heal minor injuries.

Waterflower and the rest went looking for the defeated enemies without Richard needing to give the order, exterminating more than a dozen servants in the blink of an eye. They did not hesitate to rush out the back, surrounding the paladins' quarters where the battle still raged on.

Richard remained alone, dragging his sword along as he walked towards the battlefield once he recovered a little from the discomfort. Although he did not have much mana left, he could still fight as long as he had his sword in hand. Moreover, both Gangdor and Waterflower had searched around so there was no

chance of someone being left behind. After all, the thing they spent most of their time on in the Archeron death camp was forcing prey out of hiding.

The smoke and dust finally cleared up as Richard made it to the rear, and a flash of light suddenly caught Richard's attention. A pile of stone fragments had fallen on the altar after the statue collapsed, almost burying it, and the flash was coming a corner of a piece of paper under the rubble.

Richard was shaken, walking towards the rubble to reveal the object below. The complicated formations of the altar had been destroyed by the fireballs, and it was no longer functioning. Richard could not recognise the symbols etched on it, the spell not something he knew. Anyway, what attracted him was that piece of paper.

The page was unusually large and made of unknown materials, and had been placed at the center of the altar. It was jagged on only one side, indicating that it had been torn off a book, but it was completely blank. Even the statue of the God of Valour had been destroyed under the bombardment of the six consecutive fireballs. And yet somehow, this page remained unscathed.

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Just the fact that it could withstand so much damage made this page a valuable artifact, but the church had closed up to secretly perform a ritual centering around it. Whatever that ritual was, the magic had to be related to the page.

Richard snatched the page off the altar without hesitation, hastily folding it before keeping it on his person. However, when he released his grip the page bounced open and reverted to its original position, without an inkling of a mark upon it.

This page was twice the size of the pages in Flowsand's Book of Time, and was in fact bigger and wider even than the pages of the Codex of Alucia that he'd seen in his younger days. It would be difficult to carry it around without folding it up, so Richard had no choice but to roll it up like a scroll before he could stow it away.

By the time Richard made it out of the church, the paladins were almost completely exterminated. Gangdor's trademark roars sounded out from afar, and his hungry axe scared the paladins like insects. It was needless to say that the squires' morale was depleted even further.

Richard glanced up, and the first thing he could see was the brute weaving through the cold and cheerless battlefield as he destroyed everything in his path. His abilities seemed to have grown since the past battles, and the sheen of his popping muscles indicated that he was using the full strength his body could muster. It was obvious that both his offensive and defensive capabilities had improved— even the heavy weapons of the paladins could only leave small superficial cuts on his body. On the other hand, each swing of his axe was so strong that nobody seemed able to withstand more than three hits.

This was Gangdor's true might in battle. During the battle at the reconnaissance base, he'd been stuck fighting Sir Menta who was

much stronger than him, and after that his enemies hadn't been powerful enough to bring out his full strength. He hadn't had many chances to display his skill.

The two trolls were killing machines in their own right as well. They didn't use any special abilities, crushing their opponents' morale with their raw strength alone. This was especially true for Medium Rare, who was dressed up in armour so strong he was like an immovable steel fort. On the other hand, the paladins hadn't been prepared and had armed themselves hastily as they jumped out of bed. None of them had armour, while some didn't even have weapons.

Faced with these three killing machines, the unprepared knights were massacred by the big axe and heavy hammers. It was a thorough feast of blood and meat, every movement of the big weapons letting loose chunks of bodies and big spurts of crimson.

The remaining paladins knew that outside the base was a death trap, so they retreated to camp and tried to put on their armour behind cover. However, Waterflower and Olar had already made their way over. The elven bard was not skilled at melee, but the chaos proved to be a haven for the young lady who never wore armour herself.

As for the squires, they were equally unprepared and none could face a single raptor on their own. Still, however, final victory remained difficult. The paladins were much stronger than the Baron's army in battle, a product of their unyielding spirit even when faced with certain defeat. Even in their dying moments, they still found ways to injure their enemies one last time.

By the time the battle ended, Gangdor and Tiramisu had sustained considerable injuries. Even Waterflower had a deep wound on her thigh, and although Flowsand had been present one of the infantry was still heavily wounded. What's more, two raptors had perished in battle.

As for the other side, including the six in the church building itself, all thirty of the paladins had died. Half of the squires had perished, while most of the rest had sustained major injuries. Only five or six had surrendered after losing the will to fight.

The battle at the camp finally ended, Flowsand cast spell after spell like they were water flowing out of her hands. They returned life to the soldiers who'd suffered grave injuries, and she also healed Waterflower's thigh perfectly to leave no scars. Even with mana comparable to three clerics of her level, she grew pale with exhaustion after healing everyone.

Having already inspected the war zone, Richard was deeply shocked by this outcome. He was especially surprised by the tenacity of these knights and squires in desperate straits. It was quite admirable.

By his original calculations, the paladins who were around level 8-9 just posed no threat to them, even more so because it was a surprise attack and they had run out of their beds without armour. The paladins' armour was complicated, and although its defence was exceptional it required at least half an hour to don perfectly. And the difference between a knight with his armour on and without was like night and day.

However, the final outcome of the battle differed vastly from Richard's expectations. If not for Gangdor, Waterflower, and the trolls' relentless pursuit of the strong knights, coupled with Flowsand's sheer ability as a cleric, casualties would have been near unavoidable. In fact, if the raptors were taken into account there were casualties anyway.

As he looked on at the corpses on the floor by Flowsand's side, Richard felt like there wasn't a single paladin with his body intact. He heaved a long sigh, "This was a tough battle."

"It's nothing out of the ordinary, they were men of faith." Flowsand was so weak she could not stand on her own. Leaning on

Richard's body, she nonchalantly remarked, "Those of strong faith do not feel exhaustion, do not feel pain."

The battle at the church thus died down, and the city resumed its calm. Nothing seemed different, apart from the flames atop the church being extinguished.

Most of the people awakened by the town bell hid at home, locking their doors and windows tightly. Even if this land hadn't been attacked in more than ten years, the news from various sources left them able to control their unwanted curiosity. The ordinary citizens hoped for reinforcements from the garrison, while the scattered soldiers hoped for reinforcements from the Baron's elites.

However, Forza remained in his ivory tower. The bridge had been pulled up long ago, and the gates had been closed at the start of the battle. These actions clearly showed his strategy—he had no plans to attack.

All this time, hundreds of soldiers assembled at the gathered and armed themselves one by one. The titled knight in charge sat at the command building, with no plans to send them out as he kept asking them to wait for more to gather. He wanted more intelligence gathered as well, and anyone who suggested speeding up the reinforcement efforts was sent out to scout the enemy's situation.

Some of the first parties that had set out did manage to return, but others did not. Thus, nobody brought up such suggestions again. By the time there were almost two hundred soldiers ready to move, the church's alarms had been ringing for more than an hour. Flames started to shoot out from its direction, rapidly forming a conflagration that lit up more than half the port city and sent smoke billowing into the air.

Baron Forza stood at the very top of his castle, looking into the distance as flames engulfed the church with a volatile expression

on his face.

Richard and the others had gathered at the public square in front of the church once again. This time, they had more than a dozen warhorses with them, some carrying weapons, others armour and spoils of war, all tied to their bodies.

The church had been searched in a hurry, and anything that seemed to be of value had been snatched up. Apart from the strange page, the most surprising find was fifty polished mana crystals. There were also some rubies, and magical apparatus worth nearly a hundred thousand gold coins. Flowsand especially gathered two boxes of manuals of the God of Valour, planning to start some research the next day. Lastly, there were many magic manuals that filled up three boxes.

The spells of Neian were not something that Flowsand could invoke. The labels indicated that they just had some low-level magic anyway, so nobody could understand why she would want to collect such items.

Book 2, Chapter 42

Reaping Rewards

From Gangdor's point of view, these useless scrolls were just scraps of papers. If they didn't want them landing in enemy hands, their only option with only a couple dozen minutes to scour the battlefield was to burn them all. There were many valuable items in the church, and they would not be able to clean it all up and take it away. For instance, there were a lot of topaz gemstones embedded in the statue of Neian.

Essien's sceptre was incredibly expensive as well, but the crystal used to concentrate his spells had used up all of its energy reserves to defend him from the fireballs earlier, and had already turned to ash. The sceptre itself was bent and deformed as well, but being made of gold, fine minerals, and some amount of obsidian, it would still be worth about ten thousand gold.

Richard's time in the Deepblue had made him a grandmaster at material usage, so he naturally knew the value this fight had brought him. In the beginning stages of invading a plane, pillaging and looting were the best methods to accumulate wealth. Although such actions necessitated blood being drawn, they were undeniably the fastest route one could take.

Another special reward had been scoured from Essien's room— a diary. Just the cover of the tome was so thick it took up half its volume, and the locks were guarded by complicated runes. If one deciphered it wrongly, the locks would immediately activate and turn the diary to ash. The intricate defensive measures alone assured that this book was not ordinary. A true, full-blown priest of a god in a foreign plane would definitely have invaluable experiences.

Richard decided to take this diary back with him. The locks were a type of spell formation, and such things would not pose any

trouble to him especially when from a secondary plane. A single glance told him that deciphering would be an easy task, and the only thing he'd need to put in was time and effort. Although he didn't understand the runes and incantations of this plane, Norland was more advanced and its own spells much more complicated. Deciphering this would not be a problem, especially since this was a very traditional spell formation with clear effects.

Furthermore, since the runes in the spell formation wouldn't be too difficult to crack, he could take another look at them later to help him understand the laws of this plane. That way, he could buy materials and construct runes that worked with this plane's laws perfectly.

Richard got back on his horse, looking at the castle of the Baron who would defend unto his death. He felt a tinge of pity; Baron Forza had surprisingly grown either so clever or so cowardly that he'd shut his doors, not ambushing their party on the way. They'd been waiting for such an ambush, so this left them somewhat disappointed.

However, even without the defences of the castle Forza had at least a dozen elite soldiers under him. If they fought head on, injuries would definitely not be light and death was unavoidable. This was the greatest problem Richard faced right now—he could not risk losing another member of his party. The new footsoldiers were alright, but the loss of another knight would be too huge to bear.

Even if he had a map of the Baron's castle, fighting head on once again needed Flowsand's energy to be restored. Outside of Richard himself, nobody on the frontlines could leave her care right now. Without Flowsand supporting behind them, they would feel that something was amiss when they charged in the forefront. However, Flowsand already consumed most of her divine energy.

A cleric of Flowsand's level was often a second life on the battlefield, the amount of support she gave comparable to

Richard's sheer firepower. The only reason Richard was above her was that his situational awareness and control of the battlefield allowed him to dispatch her from his side to the right locations at critical times.

Richard looked at the garrison in the distance. It was dark all around, with no loud commotion coming from it. Had he not known beforehand that this long stretch of houses was a military camp, he would have assumed it was a settlement of commoners.

During the start of the battle, several scouts had been dispatched over to check on Richard's party. However, with many of them shot down by Olar, no more scouts were sent. It seemed like the titled knight commanding the garrison was a smart person. If he was asked why he stopped sending scouts, the worst case scenario was being dismissed from his post. That was much better than losing his life.

Richard turned back to look at the burning church with a trace of pity in his eyes. The battle had generally gone according to plan, but the results were merely alright. Outside of the astounding wealth they'd just amassed, the rest of their results weren't all that spectacular. Essien had escaped, and the Baron hadn't lost any of his knights at all. As for the paladins being eradicated, that was only satisfactory and even then they'd sustained injuries. It was important to kill core members of the enemy army, which were those of high level, but that hadn't been accomplished.

"Let's go!" Richard let go of his regret and waved his arm, charging through the castle gates together with the cavalry.

The castle gates were wide open, and the obstacles that were removed were still in their positions. As for the corpses of the garrison troops lying in the sea of blood, nobody had cared about that. The warhorses neighed loudly as they galloped through, followed by two trolls and a group of raptors.

After riding for a while, Richard turned back and looked over.

Flames were still licking the church, and from where he was he could see it engulfed by the conflagration. The smoke was thick, and it seemed impossible to put the fire out now. It was a fortunate thing that the area around the church was empty— if a fire of this scale were to spread, it could very well destroy half the city.

Richard suddenly recalled the page in his hands, faintly feeling that it was perhaps the biggest bounty of the night. Before leaving, he ordered posters to be put up all the way from the city centre to the gates. They all had the same information— telling Forza that the families of the three slain titled knights were in his hands, and he wanted a ransom of 5000 gold to set them free. If he did not provide the ransom within two days, then they would all be sold as slaves.

It was common for nobles to ask for ransom for prisoners of war. Most fights were not blood feuds, and it was rare for someone to just massacre an entire battlefield. Besides, 5000 gold coins wasn't too much of a request, and was well within the Baron's boundaries. However, the decree of the God of Valour ensured that Forza could never agree to such a request. Richard knew this as well, but what he wanted to do was make sure that decision was known everywhere. The death of the three knights would already show the difference in their strength.

Once they left, Richard released the raptors into the wild. He had them scout the area, preventing any chasing troops or upcoming ambush.

The party was en route to Joven, and two raptors were scouting several kilometres ahead, one on the left and the other on the right. They were already familiar with the route, and wanted to know what direction the troops in Joven were heading. If any of them turned back to help save the Baron's land, then Richard wouldn't mind setting up another ambush to deal with them. These common troops would be tired from the endless travel, and wouldn't have much energy left. A blitzkrieg strategy with the

raptors would end them.

Flowsand was slowly recovering her own mana, and with the vitality rune on him Richard enjoyed an even faster recovery rate. He could also feel that the several difficult battles had left him on the verge of a breakthrough. He would become a level 9 mage quite soon, able to learn grade 5 spells. His experience left him confident of victory, which was the reason he was willing to start the battle with 500 soldiers. However, the knight leading the garrison was a prudent person who holed himself up, and it seemed like he had no plans to leave until the sun was up. From the distance, one could see that the fork on the road leading to the garrison was littered with barricades.

Passing over Joven, Richard could only wryly shake his head as he looked at the camp behind him. Sieging and eliminating these reserve troops would indeed be effective, and they wouldn't have to face any difficult battles, but since they didn't want to move at all he was left with no choice. He could only change his route, moving back into the mountains as he prepared to digest the outcome of this battle.

Book 2, Chapter 43

Visitor

By the time night fell once more, the party could see the mountain lake in the distance. Both Richard and Flowsand turned to look up at the northwest, as a meteor streaked across the night sky to plunge to the earth. It was extremely dazzling, making everything else up there look dim, and the trail it left behind didn't dissipate for a while.

Both of them had felt a ripple in spacetime, of the same kind that had spread when they'd stepped through the portal to this plane.

A thunderous clap echoed through the tranquil night sky as the meteor landed, and with his eyes still fixated upwards Richard felt many cryptic messages coming from it. This was a bellow of rage that caused lightning to disturb the quiet, and a commoner watching this would feel like the sky itself was falling down!

Was this the wrath of the gods? Flowsand and Richard exchanged glances, before the cleric spoke up, "It seems like there's more invaders now. I wonder where they came from."

Richard looked at the direction the meteor had landed in, calculating the location with the help of Precision and searching for it on the regional map. The corners of his lips curled upwards, "This is good news! Now we have more time, the gods of this plane won't be purely focused on us!"

"That might not be true, my Lord. It's better to be safe!" Olar said in trepidation.

Richard smiled in reply, "There's no need to worry. No matter which party is heading here, they definitely will be stronger than a party like us who were just heading for a lesser plane. The gods will definitely be more wary of them than us."

"They'll just be high in level," Waterflower said icily. Her prey in

the death camps were normally two to three levels above her, some even four or five.

“Isn’t that better?” Richard laughed loudly, “If that’s the case, it won’t be much longer till we get another valuable planar coordinate.”

“Normally, only primary planes can open a passage to a secondary plane. The coordinates we get might very well be to a primary plane,” Flowsand spoke her mind.

“And wouldn’t that make those coordinates all the more valuable?” Richard asked indifferently. However, those who picked out the meaning in his words would feel blood surging through their veins.

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By the time they returned to camp, the new hostages were placed in captivity alongside Sir Kojo’s family. There were close to fifty footsoldiers now, with several novice knights in the mix.

The atmosphere in the camp had been extremely delicate. There were only two soldiers left on duty, sitting by the campfire with their weapons by their sides. There were two raptors as well, laid down somewhere in the vicinity. There were no lights coming from the tents, and it was extremely silent, but once Richard returned many flaps opened to reveal that these soldiers hadn’t slept. The strung-up atmosphere that seemed ready to break at a moment’s notice completely relaxed.

Seeing the families of the three slain titled knights and hearing of the infiltration and annihilation of the church, three of the captured knights finally chose to capitulate. This way, Richard would not pillage their lands for the time being.

Richard split the defected soldiers into three groups, with one of his knights leading each. Several of the soldiers who’d killed for him before formed the backbone, while the remainder was filled

with fresh faces. This allowed for absolute control over these groups, and at the same time would greatly enhance the effectiveness of his forces. The Archeron knights weren't just good on a personal level— they had a wealth of experience in group battle as well.

Staying by the lake for two more days, and estimating that the reinforcements from Jayleon had almost reached Forza's lands, Richard made a surprising decision. He had all the hostages released, with two of the novice knights who hadn't defected sending the group of women and children back. They were given two carriages for transport, while the rest could only travel by foot.

After sending the hostages away, Richard set off from the camp as well. The forces were split in two— two knights took some of the defected soldiers on horseback to search for a secret path to the Direwolf Duke's lands, while Richard took the rest back to base. There were many materials to restock on there, and others that they would need to take later. The most valuable part of the base was the Lighthouse of Time, but sadly that was something that could not be carried away.

Richard planned to rest in the base for several days, deciphering Essien's diary. For now, they had time to spare.

After lunch the next day, dust clouds set off on the road leading to Baron Forza's castle. Group after group of knights advanced steadily, their bright silver armour and crimson cloaks giving them an imposing aura. Behind the knights were roughly three times as many squires, armoured soldiers who could hold their own in battle. Behind the squires were footsoldiers, most dressed in chainmail of wooden plate with various heavy weapons or giant shields on their persons. At the back were a hundred longbowmen, their enormous bows each as tall as themselves.

The army wasn't all that large, only about 500 men strong, but its gear and aura allowed it to quash Baron Forza's forces. Several

golden-red flags were hoisted up high, showing off Earl Jayleon's crest. These flags had been through many battles, and any enemy who saw them would feel their guts shrink.

Forza's scouts had already informed him of the procession. The Baron stood atop his keep, using a telescope to look at the distant flags billowing in the wind. His vision remained fixed on a black flag with a crimson axe on it, his lips pursed.

"Piersage... Why is it him?" Forza muttered, feeling a throbbing pain in his head. The problems he'd had recently were already more than enough, and Baron Piersage's arrival would add another to the list. And he didn't know when this problem would leave.

The baron himself was at the centre of the procession, dressed in his trademark black armour. The man had an extremely thin figure, with a flaky yellow face. The short, perfectly trimmed moustache didn't add an air of elegance to him, instead giving him a rather sinister aura. His eyes were always half-closed, as if he hadn't slept well the night before. But he remained upright on his horse, with no unnecessary movements. That revealed the aura of someone of true power.

The group of elite troops soon reached the entrance of the castle, meeting with another caravan heading from a different direction. This one was led by two novice knights, with several tens of horse carriages behind them. Seeing the Earl's emblem, they immediately halted in their tracks and sent their greetings to Baron Piersage, allowing his army to move ahead of them.

The doors to the castle had already been opened, and Forza came forward with several of his retainers to greet his guests. Piersage's gaze swept past Forza's body in an unrestrained manner, but what caught his attention was actually the horse carriages behind him. He raised his hand, and the entire procession stopped.

"Call the three of them here." Piersage pointed at the three titled knights.

Book 2, Chapter 44

Visitor(2)

An attendant rode over to call the three knights, and they hurried over to Piersage and stood respectfully before him. Baron Forza remained on his bridge over a hundred metres away— it wouldn't be alright to go forward and receive the man, but not welcoming him would be improper as well.

“Who are those people in the horse carriages? Why are you here?” Piersage questioned them. His voice was extremely raspy, like the sound of wind passing between granite; quite unpleasant to the ear.

The three knights looked at each other, before the oldest of the lot stepped forward to answer the question. These carriages carried the family members of the deceased titled knights, and Richard had let them go alongside the two others. They'd been sent to Joven, where the knight in charge didn't know what to do with them and so gathered several tens of carriages and sent his assistant along with 200 warriors so that they could get to the Baron's lands safely. Baron Forza would make the decision.

Piersage nodded, “So the rumours I heard were true. This means you two were captured by the invaders and then set free?”

“Yes! We would rather die than surrender, and since those invaders needed the noble ladies to be protected they had to set us free as well,” one of the former captives spoke up.

“What about the rest? I heard some of them surrendered?” Piersage asked.

“There were a total of seven of us held captive, and one died from an untreatable injury. Everyone but the two of us were subjugated by the invaders.”

“Very well, I understand,” Piersage nodded once more. But then,

he raised his voice, “Men, capture these two!”

Several soldiers shouted in unison, moving forward to apprehend the two knights. They were startled, struggling as they cried out, “We are loyal to the church and to the Baron!”

However, despite their resistance, they were simply outnumbered and could not wrest free from Piersage’s troops. They were hit on the back of their heads, to prevent their cries from annoying the Baron. Piersage did not like noisy things.

“Send those in the carriages into Baron Forza’s castle,” Piersage instructed a group of knights.

It was only then that Piersage took a look at Forza. He urged his horse over to the other baron’s position, getting off with a smile as he nodded, “My Lord Forza, it seems like I’ve made you wait quite a while.” He tapped the reins of his horse to his metal gloves as he spoke, as if he’d just come back from a hunt.

“Of course not!” Forza forced a rigid smile. That nod wasn’t even the most informal of noble greetings, and if he greeted his counterpart with propriety that would acknowledge his own inferiority.

Piersage did not seem to mind the formalities, and his attention was no longer on Forza. He looked at the surroundings and said casually, “So then, do bring me for a look around your castle. And arrange for lodging for my warriors as well. Also, I wish to watch the interrogation of the prisoners later.”

“Prisoners?” Forza was somewhat befuddled. He didn’t remember any interrogation scheduled for that day.

Piersage turned back, holding a gaze into Forza’s eyes so long that the latter’s forehead glistened with sweat, “Those prisoners who secretly sided with the invaders.”

In that moment, Forza’s expression grew extremely unpleasant.

Two hours later, a partially public trial was held in the Baron’s

halls. The ones being tried were the two knights who were released by the invaders, as well as the wives of the deceased knights, their seven mistresses, six grown daughters, and eleven children. As for the three grown sons, they had already been slain. They had a blood feud with Richard, and he would not let go of people who were destined to hate him throughout the remainder of their lives. As for the sons who weren't yet mature, he did not worry about them—he had no interest in killing children.

By the time the younger ones grew into enough strength, Richard would have stepped into a realm that they couldn't even dare look upon, and he would be back in Norland as well. If he wasn't, then he would have been turned to ashes in this plane.

Those watching over the trial had some status in the baronage. The two surviving titled knights had been summoned over, and those familiar with the dead knights were present as well. Those in charge of the city were already here, so the hall was crammed with dozens of people.

The ceiling of the dimly lit hall was very high, making it somewhat gloomy. The flickering torches did not make it much brighter, instead adding a sinister touch to the atmosphere. Baron Forza was seated at the head, with Piersage in black robes beside him. The man seemed to drowsily adjust his collars, his gaze flitting across the hall.

The hall was extremely quiet, and even the women being tried did not dare weep. Piersage was well-known for enjoying his peace, and the consequences for disturbing it would be severe.

Piersage wasn't just the top general under Earl Jayleon; he was the man's nephew as well. There were rumours that he was a bastard child of the Earl as well, so no matter how many strange habits he had and how many people he killed the Earl still heavily favoured him. Looking at it from another angle, even if the two weren't related by blood someone at level 15 was still a notable expert in the Whiterock Duchy, and as a Baron Piersage was also a

capable leader.

There were two other generals under Earl Jayleon with similar commandership, and a level 15 expert who was a little stronger than the Baron as well. However, Piersage was the only one who could both lead troops and fight himself, so he was the last person Forza wanted to see. In fact, because of Piersage's unique position and power, Baron Forza had no intention to get into a conflict with him. Not to mention avoiding conflicts, he would not even be able to reject any absurd requests the man had. If the fellow had been normal, he would already be a Viscount.

Piersage's demands were normally unreasonable, with no time given for preparation. The trial being held now was a good example. However, Forza was acutely aware of the consequences of not meeting those demands. Five years ago, Baron Lowry's family had been exterminated for getting on his bad side. Jayleon had only berated and fined Piersage for his misconduct, but even now half of Lowry's fiefdom remained under Piersage's rule.

Forza listened expressionlessly to the stories of the knights and Sir Kojo's wife, and then looked at his subordinates who were quietly listening to the story as well. He then looked at Piersage.

Piersage's half-closed eyes continuously swept past the people being tried, but he never turned to look at Forza. Forza knew that this judgement could not be avoided, so he gritted his teeth as he pointed at the knights and spoke in a deep tone, "You... Have conspired with the demons. There is no further explanation needed, you shall be punished by hanging!"

Once the judgement had been made, a clamour arose in the hall.

Book 2, Chapter 45

Visitor(3)

"What? My Lord, we've endured endless torture! Our loyalty to you and the God of Valour are beyond reproach!" The two knights were steeped in disbelief, and started yelling. They even tried to get to the platform.

They turned into wild beasts, shocking Baron Forza into standing as he tried to get behind his chair. The judgement had caught his own guards by surprise as well, and they could not believe their ears. Unable to react to the horror of those words, nobody moved to stop the maddened knights. Only the loyal guard captain rushed to protect his lord, but he was knocked away by these two knights who were prepared to sacrifice their own lives.

Forza himself was only level 8, and he'd long lost his wits. He had absolutely no idea how to deal with the current situation, and just as he was about to get caught he heard the loud sound of a sword being drawn out of its scabbard.

The knights' fingers had just been about to reach Forza's sleeve, but the two were sent flying into the crowd, knocking down many of those in attendance as they fell to the ground. They were left unable to get up, crying in pain as they rolled on the ground. Blood continuously gushed out of their limbs.

Piersage seemed to move very little originally, but he took his time easing his sword into its sheath. It was as if he was worried that the rest would miss the sharp edge of his blade. In but an instant, he'd cut the tendons and nerves of the two knights, robbing them of their ability to move.

"How dare you attack your lord?" he asked, his voice cold and detached, "You deserve to be minced meat."

Most eyes fell onto Baron Forza, who was known by many for his

reputation. Only he could challenge Piersage's authority here.

Forza's face fluctuated between green and white, as he struggled in his mind. However, a faint tingling arising out of Piersage's murderous aura told him that this was a baron he could not oppose. If he angered the moody fellow, the man would have no qualms about annihilating everyone in this hall and claiming that they were cooperating with the invaders.

Gritting his teeth, Forza spoke up reluctantly, "Baron Piersage is right. You first collaborate with the demons, and now you attack your lord. Either crime is worthy of hanging! Drag them out, and hang them on the gallows!"

Even as the guards dragged out the two knights, they were still cursing and screaming. Forza returned to his position once again, the torturous episode leaving him weak and breathless. The chair felt like it was on fire, and he was unable to sit still. The silent gazes chilled his heart beyond measure, for he knew that nobody would come under his wings ever again. The worst reputation a lord could possess was of being incapable of protecting his subjects.

And that was exactly what Piersage wanted to see.

He laughed cheerily, approaching Forza and speaking in a low whisper, "Sir Menta had a good relationship with me when he was alive, I could even call him a friend. With him dead at the hands of the invaders, I should naturally do something for him. I'll be expecting his wife, sister, and daughters in my room."

Forza nodded expressionlessly, his actions incredibly stiff.

A short while later, Menta's wife, sister, and two oldest daughters were taken to a room at the corner of the castle. The guards here weren't Forza's men anymore, they were Piersage's knights.

Menta's daughters were twelve and fourteen, both quite pretty due to their youth. After the fright from that judgement, they

anxiously looked at the room they had been brought to. It did not look like prison.

The door suddenly opened, and Piersage stepped in. He stood at the doorway, slowly taking off his gloves as he inspected the women within. Menta's wife took a step forward in surprise, "My Lord! Have you come to save us?"

His youngest daughter flew to Piersage's arms, calling out 'uncle.' However, she suddenly screamed in pain and fled, covering her chest with her arms. She had been pinched.

Menta's wife and sister turned pallid with horror. "My Lord, you..."

The knight had been close to Piersage, at least in the past. Now...

Screams and cries rang out from the women in the room, but after some loud whips they were muted into low weeps. Piersage's growls and pants, on the other hand, grew louder and louder. Two knights stood tall outside the door, just like metal statues as their cold eyes swept across the dark and gloomy corridor. They were ready to drive anyone who dared even come close away.

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Back at the reconnaissance base, Richard was carefully inserting a magic needle into the lock on Essien's diary. He infused mana into its body, causing the seal to glow with a green flame before it completely dimmed. A snap sounded out, and the lock was opened.

Richard smiled gently, satisfied with the results he'd had in a short period of time. He'd revised his theory on several special magical formations in the process, and also obtained a clearer understanding of the standard of magic in this plane. He also managed to grasp the differences between here and Norland, which would allow him to build runes with local materials in the future.

There wasn't much in the diary, and it only recorded the most

significant events in Essien's life. The writing was vigorous and powerful, exuding an atmosphere of piety.

He'd recorded an incident that occurred when he'd first joined the church, fifteen years ago. An old level 5 cleric had fallen, seduced by the devils. He'd cast a forbidden summoning spell to save the life of a bastard child, building an altar to the devil in his own basement. However, he'd only just traded his soul away when he was caught by the church, eventually sent to the gallows. The child and her mother were put into the lord's dungeons as well, tortured to death.

However, there had been an accident when they tried to destroy the altar. The devil summoned by the old cleric turned out to be very powerful, and although its main body could not pass through the portal it had tossed two imps out. These imps were not weak, and six knights were sacrificed to kill them. Essien himself had been bitten, but thankfully he had enough divine power to resist and eventually dispel the corrosive power. He'd thus managed to avoid his own fall.

Essien had noted his concerns at the end of that incident in his diary. Those imps were only the most basic of creatures in hell, but even suppressed by this plane's laws they managed to make the church's elites pay a heavy price. If someone managed to build a stable portal to hell, wouldn't it spell a catastrophe for the entire plane?

Gods could not meet every worshipper's prayers, and it was impossible to fulfill everyone's desires. The old cleric was just one example.

However, Essien knew that there were more people who sold their souls for health, power, and money, not to mention eternal life. This was a temptation nobody could resist, not even him. It was just that his knowledge as a cleric was far more profound than that of the commoners. Devils themselves were not immortal beings, so how could they give other creatures eternal life?

However, the worshippers of a god could enter their kingdoms after death, and that would be true eternal life.

Book 2, Chapter 46

History

The diary pages after the incident recorded Essien's interest in the planes. He'd pored through many tomes and books, even abusing his position to study taboo scriptures. He pinned down his inspirations in the diary, and his research indicated there was more than just one planar invasion. The effects of these invaders varied, as did their forms. Not many were human, but human invaders weren't particularly rare, either.

The oracles from the God of Valour and other gods did not have much information about planar invasions, but there were still some traces. Two important factors were sent down with these oracles—their strength, and their numbers.

Insignificant invasions like Richard's, where the aggressors were level 10 or below, were extremely rare. Only one such incident had occurred before. Those under level 13 were classified as a mild threat, while those who reached level 15 were considerably dangerous. As for those past that point, they were considered extremely dangerous.

The numbers didn't matter as much, as their levels often defined their power. Even the largest group of invaders had only numbered close to a hundred, so the numbers of the invaders were rarely mentioned.

Throughout history, none of these invaders could compare to the gods of the plane. Any of the experts within the plane could exterminate all of them single-handedly, but they often left it for the lower strata to deal with.

However, there was one exception. Three astral beasts had invaded from a foreign plane, and after a devastating battle almost all the experts of the plane had perished. Even one of the deities themselves had fallen, and the northwest of the continent had

been separated from the rest, drifting towards the seas and turning into a lone island. It took great sacrifice to slay the three beasts and destroy the portal connecting to the other plane.

The gods had kept mum about the truth of the matter, and no further probes could be made. Even the most secret of holy tomes only mentioned it in passing. At the end of it all, Essien had written down a simple line— Are planar wars inescapable?

That doubt had come twelve years after he'd begun his research into other planes.

Level 16 offered an intrinsic change in this plane, regardless of class— mages turned into grand mages, warriors became saint warriors, and priests became high priests. Essien was only above-average as a priest, and it was unknown whether he could cross level 16 in his lifetime. But this short, succinct diary proved to Richard that he was no ordinary person. He was a genius, his intelligence far surpassing his faith.

The diary entries from the past year noted that the priest had begun a search for relics of ancient times. That was why he'd come to manage a church at the edges of the Whiterock Duchy— the Land of Turmoil was nearby, in the mountains that Richard's base had wound up in.

The Land of Turmoil spanned great swathes of land, more than 10,000 square kilometres in area with only the edges settled. The place was extremely dangerous, with tall mountains, steep cliffs, deep ravines and ridges being common sights. There were few humans nearby, with mostly powerful beasts roaming the lands.

The Land of Turmoil was wedged between the fertile plains and the Redrock Highlands, capped off by the Bloodstained Lands to the north. Spacetime ripples weren't uncommon here, and foreign creatures regularly drifted in from the rifts. It was unknown how many foreign species had made this place their home, and Essien wanted to find vestiges of the tear in the void caused by the rifts

they'd come here through. He wanted to use those traces to unravel the mystery of the planes.

The priest had vast ambitions—he wanted to discover the essence of planes and time, finding a method to link to other planes. He'd realised that the plane's overall might had dwindled from invasion to invasion, and also guessed that this signified that the gods were growing weaker as well.

The deities would send out oracles for every batch of invaders, and the stronger the enemies the more information was provided. They had to consume a great amount of energy to even make these prophecies, and for them to be clear required inordinate amounts.

The withering powers in this plane was proof of his assumptions. The plane had yet to recover to its peak from before the battle with those astral beasts, and even to this day was a third away from its former heights. What's worse, no new god had replaced the one that had fallen. No churches had been formed in recent years, and even the Chosen, saints, and petitioners of the old ones had not recuperated.

In the thirteenth year of his search, Essien had finally come up with a new conjecture: this was not the only plane with gods in it. Such thinking was extremely taboo under the teachings of the gods— if his diary was leaked, he would definitely be burnt at the stake.

He believed that since war was inevitable between the myriad planes, then resources and power were paramount. One had to think of a way to open portals to another plane if they wished to break this deadlock, invading them successfully. Stealing the wealth, resources, and talents of those planes would be the only way to strengthen their own. It was also the only way to ensure that their power would not regress further.

All this information left Richard speechless. According to the gods, this plane was known as Faelor. Richard gathered from the diary's information that, more often than not, these 'invaders'

were people who'd accidentally wound up here through the rifts in spacetime; they didn't originally intend to conquer it. As for the astral beasts, they were likely powerful beings that could open portals in spacetime and travel the myriad planes themselves, like his own master, Sharon.

Interplanar wars were already deep-rooted within the psyche of Norland's inhabitant. Any family that had stood the tests of time had at least one plane's resources backing them. Because of this, wars in Norland far exceeded those in these secondary planes in scale.

The first time Richard met Gaton, this marquess had been allocating tasks to nibble away at a certain plane. Due to the importance of interplanar war, those matters were extremely complicated. They needed a standard battle plan from the moment of infiltration, inclusive of their setup and expansion all the way to total conquest.

Thus, even in Norland only the upper echelons of society were involved with interplanar wars. Theory and tactics on such conquest only spread through the inner circles of nobility, and commoners would never be privy to such information. Richard's own knowledge came from Gaton's study, and all his actions had been an attempt to adapt the theory he'd learnt to practice. Put bluntly, he was far from devising his own unique methodology to conquer planes.

Essien had discovered the pressing importance of interplanar war without even experiencing a proper war in Faelor himself; to call him a genius would be a shame. His foresight was acute, and he managed to derive great visions of the future from small details. If time permitted, he could very well have become an influential figure that brought forth a revolution.

However, he was just a priest. Every time Richard thought of this point, he could only lament in pity.

Book 2, Chapter 47

Holding

Essien's main weakness was his lack of power. He needed to be the pope of the Church of Valour at minimum to influence history, and even then realising his wishes would only be a mild possibility. Popes were normally level 18, in order to suppress the cardinals who ranged from level 16 to 17. Level 17 high priests could possibly become popes, barely containing their cardinals, but that was the limit. Even level 16 would be too far-fetched, and after their fight Richard knew the priest would be lucky to get to even 15.

Even more important was that Essien had secretly conducted research into the taboo of planes and spacetime, so Neian didn't favour him as much as he would otherwise, stumping his growth. Thus, this priest who had pried open the door to the mysteries of the endless planes would forever disappear into the sands of time as someone insignificant. The real reason for the seal on the diary was that he had foreseen his death, and one day before it he planned to activate the destruction magic so this book that he'd poured blood and sweat into would disappear from the plane alongside him.

However, things didn't always go according to plan. Essien could never have guessed that Richard would boldly barge into Forza's lands and attack the Church of Valour. His diary had thus fallen into the invader's hands, and what's more this was a runemaster with an extremely strong foundation. Richard easily dismantled the seal which otherwise couldn't have been broken in Faelor.

Rather surprisingly, Richard discovered the heritage of the indestructible page at the end of the diary. It was something that belonged to a divine being from another plane, found by an adventurer in some ruins. It was from the Book of Holding, of which Essien had recorded there were a total of nine pages. Once all nine pages were found, the book could be reformed and

completed, and it was rumoured that a part of the book's powers could be realised for every two pages assembled. Even Essien did not know what the completed book would grant its wielder— even including the one Richard had found, the Church of Valour only had two pages.

These pages only appeared randomly during rifts in spacetime. Nobody knew who they belonged to or where they came from, nor why the book was damaged or what sort of existence created it.

This single page could store a single spell of grade 6 or below, and only for a month. However, it could be used repeatedly. A single page wasn't useful for much else, needing two to activate at least part of the book's powers, but for Richard who was about to advance to level 9 it was an extremely powerful magic tool. It was akin to having an extra instance of his strongest spell, increasing his combat power by a third.

Richard officially broke through to level 9 the day after breaking the seal on Essien's diary. After some thought, he decided to upgrade Nature's Beckon to grade 5. The spell could be upgraded all the way to grade 9, summoning a different creature every time.

Richard took less than half a day to master the upgraded spell, after which he took out the page and studied it. This page seemed different from regular magic scrolls— the spell wasn't written onto it, and the page instead served as a container. Richard's heart skipped a beat as he thought of the books he had browsed through in the Deepblue. Some intelligent species did not use words to communicate, instead talking through runes or even spiritual force. Perhaps this page he'd found from Essien had been made by one such species.

Having studied it for some time, Richard decided to experiment. He held the page in his hand as he cast Nature's Beckon once. After a perfect incantation with no mistakes, he felt the elven blood in him come alive and the ivory bracelet radiate a current of warmth. The two powers fused into his body, assisting the formation of the

grade 5 spell. It flashed in Richard's palms, but instead of being cast it entered the page of holding.

An image of several lifelike direwolves appeared on the originally blank page. These creatures were the same as the boars, scale-like armour padding their backs and shoulders. However, their offensive power was greater, leading to a significant increase in battle prowess. Even drawn on the page they seemed awe-inspiring.

However, Richard felt that something was amiss. He picked up the page and observed closer, counting a total of five wolves. Indeed, five!

Nature's Beckon always summoned anywhere between one and three familiars. With Richard's gifts, his incantations, hand movements, and mana transfer were perfect to the textbooks. His summons thus normally reached the upper limit of three, and the buffs from his elven bloodline and the ivory bracelet pushed that to four. However, now that he'd grown in level there was one more creature in the summon.

Richard replayed the spellcasting process in his mind once more, and determined that his elven bloodline had strengthened once more. The direwolves were equivalent to enhanced raptors, making Nature's Beckon the strongest spell for him at grade 5.

However, he did not know if this buff would apply to other types of summons as well. If such a thing was possible, then the higher grades of summoning spells would be overpowered. The summoning of demons, wyverns, and golems were all powerful spells. However, as powerful as those summons were the success rate of those spells were low. Even when cast only one familiar would be summoned at most. If the buff worked on these spells, it would make for an absolute increase in strength. However, he would only know that after he advanced to level 13 or 14.

However, he could attempt Summon Undead at his current level.

Richard suppressed his excitement, immediately casting the spell. Sadly, only three skeletons were left dancing around the room after the flash of light, indicating that the buffs did not apply to undead.

He calmed down and eventually snapped his fingers, dispelling the spell. Even just a buff for Nature's Beckon was more than enough. He sat down again, looking at the five wolves on the torn page as he finally allowed himself to feel a little proud. Ever since Gaton had mentioned that Sharon had a summoner's bloodline, he was eager to show her these spells.

Even the legendary mage wouldn't be able to do better than five wolves at the same level, could she? Even with the addition of her bloodline, she would be able to summon six at most. Richard wondered: if his master saw his achievements today, would he earn a lot of Sharon's Delight? For some reason or the other, the Night of Destiny surfaced in his mind once more. That beautiful yet realistic dreamscape of the Deepblue Aria once again waltzed in the void, carrying his master's expectations.

There were still many things he had to do. The promises he made to the two most important women in his life still required a great deal of work.

Once he regained his calm, Richard stowed the page away and opened up his map, pondering about his next step. In fact, most of his theories about the buffs to his summoning were right, except that he got one thing wrong. In the scenario he'd imagined, Sharon's spell would be much more powerful than he thought.

It would only be in the distant future, when he would see his teacher cast a legendary Red Dragon Summon, that he would realise Sharon's gift had three unique properties. The first was an increase in familiars, the second was an increase of one to three grades of the creatures she summoned, and a mana reduction when casting summoning spells. Hence, if a level 9 Sharon were to face off against Richard and both of them were limited to Nature's

Beckon, Richard's five wolves would be facing over a dozen direbears.

Book 2, Chapter 48

Coincidence

Richard marked a new spot on his map, indicating the projected location of the other invaders. Although he did not know which plane they had come from, they definitely were not friendly forces. It was more dangerous to join forces with another invader during a war than to ally with the natives themselves.

Having deduced several possible paths to take, Richard fell into a bout of hesitation. No matter what, they had to forfeit their base. This position had been exposed far too long ago, and staying would bring a risk of death.

However, they'd only returned to pack supplies, confusing their opponents while they stalled for time. Richard's hesitation was not for that—he was wondering whether they should remain in Forza's lands for a longer period of time. If he could deal a heavy blow to Jayleon's reinforcements, then the Baron's lands would have their doors wide open to give him anything he wanted. The castle definitely wouldn't be able to stop him and his ferocious party.

But there was great risk in staying, the sort of risk that arose if one stayed in position too long in guerilla warfare. The opponents would figure out the threat of his forces, analysing and predicting their movements. After all, he was just an intruder in Faelor. Even if he came from a stronger plane with a better path to power, he had no allies.

Right now, the most important thing to do was to determine the strength of the troops coming to aid Forza. He took out another map, one that marked the factions and powers in the Whiterock Duchy. Under the Whiterock Duke himself were a marquess, three greater earls, two lesser ones, and over fifty barons. Jayleon himself had a viscount, four barons, a powerful knight, and two

great mages under him.

And when Richard saw information on Piersage, his eyes slightly constricted. Baron Piersage was similar to Sir Menta; they were both powerful individuals who could also lead armies. Piersage was a famed general in the entire duchy, and if he was the one leading the reinforcements they would be impossible to defeat in one fell swoop.

Richard's army definitely put him at a disadvantage. Even if regular soldiers were taken out of the equation, Piersage was sure to have his own core elites. A fight with the baron would only end in a bitter victory that took out part of his army, unless he could find a suitable battleground and divide the man's forces. However, the probability of such a thing happening was far too low. Piersage was a much better leader than Forza, which meant that Richard lost his edge both in elites and in leadership.

Richard heaved a sigh of relief, dismissing the idea of taking out Forza's castle. The amount of wealth the baron would have accumulated was tempting, but no matter how he thought it over he didn't have much of a chance against the reinforcements. If Piersage really was the one leading them, he would have no chance at all.

He thus picked up his map and began to look at routes going to the northwest, tracing many such routes with his fingers. He followed the intersection between the Land of Turmoil and the Direwolf Duke's Sequoia Kingdom, before entering the desolate yet chaotic Bloodstained Lands.

The Bloodstained Lands were an area where humans, barbarians, and the desert people mingled. There were patches of both barren and fertile land, with the terrain being quite hilly. There was a constant shortage of food, making it a den of thieves, criminals, and murderers that was a nightmare for the common man. Many criminal ringleaders and slave traders operated out of the place, treating all creatures as prey like hyenas.

The place was chaotic and dyed in blood, but it suited Richard's current needs. As for Forza's lands, the seed had already been planted. He could harvest it whenever he was ready, and that time wasn't necessarily too distant.

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Richard did not know that an extremely intense battle had occurred nearby. It was where he'd marked the other invaders to arrive, a fair distance off his travel route.

Tens of kilometres away from the Bloodstained Lands, a towering, strange portal stood tall as it flashed with vibrant light. Gravity was warped, many small objects floating in mid-air while others sank deep into the earth. Many images flashed in the rift formed by the portal, looking like several magical beasts. However, when these images contorted and disappeared, they turned out to be mere illusions.

The portal was so massive the spacetime around it was warped. Black rifts were floating around everywhere, extremely dangerous tears in the fabric of space that could even cut a saint warrior from Norland in half.

The portal expanded and contracted as several knights in heavy black armour leapt out. Each of them was of large build, looking extremely malevolent. Even the horses that they rode were very strange, as all of their bodies were black. Their fur was long and thick, with two canines on the side of their jaws.

The surroundings of the portal were not peaceful at all, instead a vicious battlefield filled with shouts and slashes. Native warriors and paladins had already surrounded the portal, doing their best to destroy the black knights that were here to invade them. Behind the warriors were tens of priests and clerics, casting spells incessantly as their hands glowed with divine light, buffing the warriors under them.

The buffs were equivalent to an extra level for these warriors,

and they roared praises for their priests and hurled curses at the enemies. Even if the opponent plunged two swords into their bodies and they could feel the cold of the blades piercing their organs, they still wielded their weapons against these black knights. Everything would be worth it as long as they could injure these opponents in the slightest.

They were brave unto death, and coupled with their sheer numbers their valour had great effect. The black knights were forced down from their horses, slain by a surging swarm of warriors. However, every death of a knight also made for ten losses on their side, and those warhorses were extremely brutal as well. Even without their owners they ran free, trampling and charging down the battlefield if their owner was not dead. Their hooves and sharp teeth were fatal weapons, and one of them even ripped off an opponent's head and started to eat it in the middle of the battle!

Such a terrifying sight scared the cowards, but the greater number were thoroughly enraged. A paladin howled loudly as he crashed into the warhorse's flank, plunging his sword deep into its heart. The black warhorses had a coat of extremely thick fur that could rival a direbear's defence, but the undaunted all-out attack was something that fur could not prevent. The warhorse neighed loudly like a savage beast, even as a dozen more weapons buried themselves into its body. Most only made about a dozen centimetres in, but some managed to get to its insides.

The clobbered warhorse writhed, using its last dregs of strength as it moved forward and chomped down on a paladin. The creature's jaws had frightening power, disfiguring the knight's armour and smashing half the breastplate and a pauldron to smithereens as he wailed in agony.

Even as each warrior gave their lives to the cause, the black knights were unbreakable like a reef in a current. They surged out of the portal endlessly, their front lines spreading wide to form a defensive line. As time passed, this line began to push forward.

Book 2, Chapter 49

Coincidence(2)

At over 2.5 metres tall, these black knights were tall and built like beasts. Their warhorses were much larger than normal as well: even at their height the knights were barely taller than their mounts. The hundred kilo greatswords and large halberds seemed weightless in their hands, as they swept through their opponents like whirlwinds without using the tips much at all. Every time one of their weapons touched something, it was completely decimated.

When two old mages stepped out of the portal, the situation began to change. The moment they saw the situation, they instantly cast Acid Fog. What's more, the spells didn't avoid the black knights at all!

Once the spells were cast, the sky was filled with large clouds of yellowish green mist that enveloped almost half the battlefield. Screams rang out when it made contact with skin, and blisters started forming on all the enemies.

The paladins roared out to bolster morale, trying their hardest to repel the acid fog with their energy. But ordinary soldiers, even those at level 6 or 7, did not possess the ability to do so. Bone-crushing pain begot cries of agony, sending the soldiers into disarray. Burnt by the acidic air, their eyes turned completely red. It stung so hard that they couldn't possibly open their eyes.

On the other hand, the black knights glowed with energy as they nonchalantly forged past the mist. Their weapons left behind a rain of blood and flesh, while even their horses charged ahead without being affected at all.

The area within the fog experienced a massacre. The priests in the distance were enraged, stomping their sceptres into the ground with full force as they cast a curse. Divine light shot out of their fingertips, exploding into a blinding sphere of light at the

destinations. The divine power brought forth a violent gust of wind that scattered most of the fog, but in that short period of time ten knights and two paladins had been hacked to death. And even though the mist was blown away, those already tainted by the corrosion continued to suffer.

The clerics grew increasingly busy as they continued to heal even as they purified the air, spells constantly shooting out of their hands. Alas, the battle seemed increasingly hopeless.

The portal suddenly stopped for a few seconds, a strong ray of light seemingly bursting forth with a fog that was black as ink. The fog tossed and tumbled, and a few ferocious roars sounded out from within.

The fog finally dissipated to reveal a female knight up in the air, riding a large black beast. She gently patted the creature on its neck, and it immediately stretched out and floated down to the ground.

Only once it landed would people realise how large this beast truly was. It resembled a lion, with long sharp teeth protruding from its upper lips. Its mane flew majestically even without any wind, making it look incredibly mighty. Stood upright it was even taller than the black knights, but its stance was unimaginably graceful. Black armour extended all along its back to its tail, the tip of which was like a scorpion's sting.

The knight atop the beast would be considered petite by human standards, and atop a creature of its size she seemed like a little doll. She was dressed in black armour and cloak, with her eyes and hair being of the same colour as well. She blended in perfectly with the knights and beast, but the style of her armour was quite unknown. Its defence and any other capabilities were unknown, but the design was even more revealing than that of Blood Paladin Senma. Outside of the gauntlets and boots, the armour covered even less than just underwear would. Outside of her breasts and three strategic thin leaves at the abdomen, she was almost naked.

The woman had a lethargic expression on her face, as if she'd been woken from an intoxicating dream. She had a hand on the beast's mane, while the other was clenched into a tiny fist that she pressed against her lips as she let out a few lazy yawns. She opened seemingly perplexed eyes to study the surrounding area, immediately kicking the beast in the thigh to have it crouch.

“What's going on?” Her voice was extremely gentle, so tender it was like she'd been woken up early in the morning with her lover beside her.

The black knight standing beside the beast's landing spot hadn't joined the battle, instead assuming a guarding stance the moment the dark fog exited the portal. He was a head taller than the rest of the knights on the battlefield, his strength and imposing aura more powerful than the rest. It was plain to see that he was their leader. “It's the natives of this plane, my Lady. They had an ambush set up outside the portal, I guess they wanted to destroy all of us at once. It's a pity that their abilities are so weak. Please wait a little longer, we'll eliminate these plebeians who don't know what's good for them at once!”

“An ambush by the natives? That's really a surprise!” The knight completely opened her seductive eyes, studying the surroundings before finally resting her gaze on the group of priests not far away. She narrowed her eyes slightly, “Level 15 priests? It looks like the ambush was well thought out, what determination! But... do they really think level means everything?”

“Rest assured, my Lady. I'll go and behead all of them right now!” the leader solemnly promised.

The knight let out a sweet smile, “How could I wait that long?” She jumped into the air the moment she was done speaking, twisting herself behind her cloak before disappearing completely.

She appeared in the midst of the priests in the blink of an eye, as if the several hundred metres between them were non-existent.

The knight poked her tiny head out from behind the cloak, charmingly and gently sticking to a priest's body. She wrapped her left hand around his shoulder, boldly reaching into the neckline of his robes to gently touch his chest. A dagger that was black as ink inexplicably appeared in her right hand, and she pierced his throat with hardly any effort. The extremely sharp edge of the blade immediately cut into half of the priest's neck before it was quietly withdrawn.

Everything had happened so fast. The priest hadn't even realised anything, casting one last spell before feeling something wrong with his neck. That was the exact moment that fresh blood started spurting out, and as he struggled to keep from falling eight of his kin had experienced the same fate. Blood either spurted out of their necks, or there was an eye-catching red scar on their neckline.

The high-ranking priest at the centre sensed something amiss, sweeping his gaze all around as he raised both hands at the same time. A holy barrier that seemed to be liquid shot out of his hands, covering his entire body. Half a second later, the Wall of Valour would be complete. Only a warrior above level 15 would be able to break it once done, and even such a warrior would have to use their full power.

However, a split second from completing the spell, the old priest's body suddenly trembled. The mana he had condensed withered, scattering away as his spell failed.

Book 2, Chapter 50

Coincidence(3)

The priest froze with an indescribable fear as he slowly looked down. Seeing the black dagger that had inexplicably appeared at his chest, he raised a stunned face to look at an enchanting visage.

The knight truly was extremely beautiful, with an air of mystery surrounding her. Her misty eyes made it seem like she was forever stuck in a battle with a lover, and at that moment she was so close to him she was practically leaning. Their faces were merely ten centimetres apart, and the priest could feel the warmth of her glowing face and enchanting breath.

He struggled to lower his head once again. Outside of her deep cleavage and the rest of her body exposed by the scant outfit, the most shocking thing was that her hands were held tightly onto a double-edged dagger.

Even with the dagger completely buried into his chest, the wound did not expand. Only a little blood seeped out, but while the dagger's tip had been in front of him before now it was the hilt instead. He hadn't even felt the change happen, much less see it.

The old priest did not speak a word, but he was not yet dead. The short blade had pierced his spine, not his heart, and lifeblood was still pumping vigorously from his beating chest.

The knight suddenly let out a malicious smile, but her beauty added an element of animalistic charm to it. She suddenly placed her hand on his chest and pushed in with abrupt force, managing to pierce his ribcage and pull out a violently beating heart.

The priest gaped up at the sky, his gaze slowly blurring. The knight stuck out her crimson tongue and crudely licked his face, after which she took his heart to her mouth.

Squelch! A crushing sound rang out as she took a clear bite,

starting to chew.

However, she frowned after a few bites, spitting out flesh and blood as she cursed loudly, “It reeks!”

She waved her hand at the same time, sending the remains of the heart flying. It lit up with gentle flames as it arced through the air, and a gust of wind whistled past as her beast swallowed the heart whole. It then landed in the midst of the battlefield, narrowing its eyes as it opened its big mouth in delight. It was as though that small heart was the best thing it had ever tasted.

The beast had crushed dozens of soldiers with its weight, and judging from the minimal twitching of their bodies it seemed like they had met their end.

It was only then that the old priest’s body slipped down, falling to the ground with a thud. The knight fished out a clean, white handkerchief out of who knows where as she carefully wiped the blood off her left gauntlet. The fights were still raging on in her surroundings, but the battle was already over. The loss of the priests and clerics were a heavy blow to the enemy soldiers, the magic supporting them vanishing as they lost more than 30% efficiency instantly. Tens of black knights continued to step out of the portal, and with the front lines collapsed the battle became a massacre. Some deserters could even be seen at the edge of the battlefield.

The knight finally finished wiping her gauntlet clean, and followed up by dabbing away the blood and flesh left at the corners of her mouth. However, her lips were still stained crimson—it was as though they would drip with more blood at any time.

She looked at the old priest’s corpse with eyes still wide open, spitting out viciously with a look of disdain, “A level 15 priest but he’s still rancid! As expected, old meat really isn’t for me. I should find something soft and tasty...”

By that time, the battle had already ended. The fierce knights had

decimated the ambush with the help of the great mages, even taking out those who tried to flee. The deserters hadn't gotten very far before they were caught.

The near three metre tall leader walked to the female knight once again, bowing almost ninety degrees to reach her height. He spoke in an incredibly respectful tone, "All the enemies have been killed, my Lady. We lost nine of our own in battle, and our number now stands at 71. What instructions do you have?"

The knight was in no hurry as she surveyed the battlefield. Over six hundred corpses lay on the battlefield, with more than half of those surrounding the fallen knights and their mounts. The knights, and even their mounts, had launched a formidable counterattack when they neared death.

The battlefield reeked of blood, with more still flowing out of the piles of corpses to seemingly dye the entirety of the land red. The knight took in a deep breath to soak in the stench in the air, closing her eyes with a look of incomparable euphoria on her face. After what seemed to be forever, she finally murmured, "Wherever you are, blood always smells so good!"

The knight captain let out a few maniacal laughs, "So true!"

The female knight opened her eyes once more, "For a plane limited to level 18, sending a level 15 priest is quite the effort. But all that's useless against me. Alright, gather everyone around, I want this battlefield cleaned in ten minutes. After that, let's go take a look at what the people at the base were doing and why the portal opened up at such a god forsaken place that we got ambushed!"

Having given the order, she walked to the large manticore while saying coldly, "I hope there's a few tasty humans in the base. I'll only consider sparing those worthless creatures if I'm satisfied tonight."

The leader of the knights let out a deep laugh, "Then it looks like

there will be more blood tonight, Lady Sinclair!”

Sinclair responded viciously, “Don’t rain on my damned parade!”

The knight immediately went quiet, trembling slightly.

Any noble from Norland would recognise this female knight. She was Sinclair Schumpeter, one of the elite daughters of the Schumpeter Family. At the same time, they would also recognise the family’s elite warriors—the bearguard knights.

From their mounts to the knights themselves, the bearguard were specially bred. Each individual was at least level 12, and they had three runes on them as a standard. Only being a few hundred years old, the Schumpeters only had about 150 of them, but the fact that Sinclair brought out more than half to this plane proved that they put a lot of stock into this battle. It also showed their sincerity and determination to remain in the top circles of Faust: were Sinclair to meet with any mishap on this incursion, the family would not be far off from losing its island.

Only in her early twenties, Sinclair was just level 15. However, most people focused on her leadership in battle—her strange and ferocious style of command would be put on for all to see. If not for Alice Archeron’s meteoric rise to the top, she might have been the brightest female general in the Sacred Alliance.

In a secondary plane with the power limit capped at level 18, the Schumpeters had sent Sinclair, two great magicians at level 14, and eighty bearguard knights alongside support from an existing base. This would be more than enough to serve as the seeds for controlling this plane. Why would there be any chance for failure? The biggest expense for the family had been transporting this entire team.

However, any accidents could happen in the endless planes. Half an hour later, Sinclair was stood in front of the Schumpeter base with an ashen complexion.

Book 2, Chapter 51

Trial

She had been informed that this base used to belong to the Mensas, and had been operating for more than ten years. There were over 500 soldiers stationed, controlling a ten-kilometre radius like a small town. This place was far larger than the small outpost the Archérons had given Richard, and the difference was obvious from first sight— these walls were more than ten metres tall, unlike the minuscule ones Richard had mounted a defence behind.

With another ten stable years of operations, the family could have applied to the Church of the Eternal Dragon and have the plane earmarked and numbered. If the leader of the base remained strategic, resourceful, and unscrupulous, it wouldn't even take that long. A plane with an identity with the Church of the Eternal Dragon would have a stable passage, which meant greater volumes of resources and benefits could be drawn from it. This was another reason why the Schumpeters were so willing to invest their capital into this.

However, the base in front of Sinclair was deathly quiet, the gates half open with not a single person in sight. The silence was deafening, and surrounded by forest the base wasn't even connected to any other location.

How could a base with more than 2000 people, 500 of them being soldiers, survive in this barren forest? Even not considering agricultural supplies they would have had to establish more than ten hamlets nearby. Sinclair didn't think the Mensas would make a mistake of this nature, as it was common sense.

Her eyes narrowed, a strong sense of unease building up. With a wave of his hands, the leader of the bearguard knights personally led ten knights and a great mage into the base.

Half an hour later, they walked out of the base with extremely unpleasant looks on their faces. The knight captain and the mage stood in front of Sinclair, but they were both at a loss for words.

Sinclair spoke coldly, “Speak! What is it that you can’t say? Is there a pile of dead people inside? Even so, what’s the big deal? After all, they should all belong to the Mensa Family.”

The captain finally spoke up, “My Lady, there isn’t a single person in the base. However, everything else is still present, including armour, supplies, and clothes. The only thing absent is the humans.”

The mage opened his mouth to speak, but what he said was even more depressing. “Unfortunately, none of the items are usable. The place is overflowing with the power of time, and it is impossible to purge. These are not livable conditions.”

“And what about the Lighthouse of Time?!” she screamed in question.

The captain and mage exchanged glances, and the former admitted, “It’s been extinguished...”

“EXTINGUISHED?!” Sinclair’s voice resounded through the empty base.

“Yes.” The captain braced himself for the worst.

For her part, Sinclair was dumbfounded. Everyone grew quiet in a split second, the only sound in the area being that of the wind.

“Heh... Heh... Hahahahaha!” Sinclair started with a giggle, that grew into a full-blown laughter that startled the birds on the mountain. The manic guffawing continued on for a good ten minutes before she finally calmed down. By then, her face had started to turn a peculiar shade of red, looking even more bewitching than before.

It took her some effort to catch her breath, “So we’ve reached a completely foreign plane, and can’t go back. And Norland won’t be

able to reach us unless we can find a way to rekindle the Lighthouse of Time... You guys need to make a decision now. Are you ready to tough it out with me?”

The captain and two mages glanced at each other, before agreeing to stick by Sinclair and vowing to listen to her every instruction. Even if they'd been unwilling they would have had no choice. There were only two ways to conquer a plane— occupy it all, becoming an enemy of every creature of the plane in the process, or infiltrate society and gain allies. Both were comparable in terms of danger and difficulty, but the second would cause one's standing in their home plane to fall.

Either way, the captain and mages only knew combat, not politics and strategy. Even if this plane was limited to level 18, leaving Norland's protection meant they wouldn't be able to hold on very long themselves. And given Sinclair's personality, if they didn't declare loyalty she would likely have them killed anyway.

Sinclair faked a smile and eyeballed the expressions on the three faces in front of her. She then said, “Smart move. Anyway, you lot have a bit of good luck. Don't you feel anything yet?”

The two great mages tried to extend their senses and analyse the situation, but could only get a hint of what was going on. They couldn't pinpoint this good luck Sinclair was talking about. As for the captain, the powers of space and time were not his domain. He decided not to waste his efforts.

Seeing all three of them baffled, Sinclair flashed a sinister smile before sticking out her bright red tongue and licking her lips, “The timeflow of this plane is anywhere between an eighth and a tenth of Norland's. That means it has been blessed by the Eternal Dragon! When we take this plane and return home, we'll leave the old fogies with an unforgettable impression! I can't wait to find out how their hearts will taste!”

She patted the neck of the manticore, causing the humongous

creature to stand upright as it abruptly let out an earth-shaking roar.

“All of you, come with me! Let’s find a place to rest tonight. Better still if there’s young and beautiful men and women!” The manticore leapt over the knights in the midst of her speech, being the first to race down the mountain.

.....

Back in a church in the Whiterock Duchy, Essien was kneeling inside a room as he spoke of the invasion of Baron Forza’s lands. Although the place wasn’t big, there was a tall platform to one side with three elderly priests behind it. From their dense divine powers to the glow of their skin, it was evident that they were higher in rank than Essien himself. And from the looks of things, it looked like Essien was on trial.

And he was on trial indeed. The Church of Valour in Forza’s territory had been torn to shreds, and the page from the Book of Holding which was held in high regard by the God of Valour had sadly been destroyed. Furthermore, all of the clerics and paladins of the church had been killed. Any one of these charges was sufficient for Essien to be served a cup of poisoned wine.

However, Essien’s voice still resounded through the hall. Once he was done explaining the situation, he didn’t try to defend or clear his name, instead sincerely asking for the church to send out a troop of battle priests along with an army of paladins supported by elites to eliminate the invaders. He even asked for the elite mountain troops of the Whiterock Duchy!

Book 2, Chapter 52

Trial(2)

“Why?” the old priest in the middle questioned in a dignified manner.

“This group of invaders is unlike any that has come before. They’re much younger, with great potential and the cunning to obtain what they wish for. Their style of battle is unusual and unpredictable, and most importantly they have a cleric amongst their ranks!”

The one on the left commented, “Does a group of insignificant invaders really require our battle priests and the more powerful paladins? Even intruders of a higher level would not need the church activating all its troops.”

“This time is different. I have a premonition that this invasion could cause an interplanar war!” Essien remarked bitterly, a pained smile on his face.

“An interplanar war?” the priest on the right sneered, “Less than two dozen invaders could cause a war between planes? Hmm, that term is interesting though, it’s my first time hearing of it. Are you saying that these insignificant invaders are all individually as powerful as the astral beasts of the past?”

Essien helplessly repeated himself with a sigh, “They have a cleric...”

The old priest sitting on the right sniggered even more piercingly, saying, “A cleric? How many spells did they cast? Don’t tell me it was more than ten. This is Faelor, the God of Valour’s plane. Which demonic god can secretly send their power here? Even children know this, Essien! I once thought you were bright and responsible. I didn’t expect you to fabricate nonsense in a bid to cover up your defeat!”

Essien opened his mouth, but was momentarily at a loss for words. The priest was right; even he himself was unable to believe it until he saw that priestess perform more than ten spells. Even if Baron Forza's soldiers brought back news that all pointed to this conclusion, he'd never once believed it himself, thinking all along that it was an excuse they'd given to shirk responsibility.

Despite knowing the outcome, he heaved a sigh and repeatedly nodded his head, saying, "The cleric did in fact perform more than ten spells." Such a reply could very well increase the degree of his punishment, and he knew it, but he really needed to warn the high priests.

The moment he said this, the faces of the three priests immediately changed. It was not with surprise, however, but anger. After a period of silence, the one in the middle asked those to his sides, "How should this be dealt with?"

The priest on the left hesitated to speak, but after a while he couldn't help but blurt out, "Penal servitude."

The priest on the right sighed deeply, looking at Essien with a piercing gaze, "Penal servitude!"

The one in the center nodded in agreement, looking at Essien, "Priest Essien. Your negligence has destroyed a church, lost a sacred relic, and had the church's paladins killed. The clergy hereby sentences you to five years of penal servitude in a barren land. Do you have any objections?"

Essien shook his head. In fact, the priests were already letting him off by punishing him in this manner. Even though people who were dealt with the same punishment as him rarely survived past three years, he himself could likely survive more than ten. This was much better than an immediate execution, as through this they were giving him a chance to live. Penal servitude was considered a punishment with pardon.

The priest in the middle ended with a question, "Essien, do you

have any requests?”

And in response, Essien resolutely lifted his head, “My last request is for battle priests and at least a hundred paladins to be deployed to destroy these invaders, and leave none of them standing!”

The priest looked conflicted, saying with a sigh, “There is something that you’re still not aware of, my child. Another batch of powerful invaders has recently entered our plane. The church’s battle priests and half of the elite paladins were transferred out to deal with them, but the results of the battle are out—the combined forces of two big churches were all wiped out.”

“What?!” Essien stood up abruptly in shock.

“Nothing can be done about the invasion of Baron Forza’s lands at the moment. We can only rely on Earl Jayleon’s troops handling the situation. We need to use all our might to rid us of these new invaders.

“We have already cautioned the cardinals of the central church, and will soon gather an army to suppress these enemy troops.”

Essien sighed and said helplessly, “I still stand by my request. Even the strongest invaders can be defeated if they have no priests in their midst, but these ones are different. They will establish themselves here and grow, eventually destroying all of Faelor!”

“Enough! Essien, I’ve had enough of your wild imagination!” the priest on the right rebuked angrily, “If only you didn’t live in your fantasies all the time, and spent that time studying the Lord’s teachings. Your achievements would greatly surpass what they are today!”

“Perhaps...” Essien sighed, but he stopped retorting and let two paladins drag him out of the hall.

.....

Early that morning, Richard set off from the base alongside his

troops. It would be a long journey, and nobody could estimate the time of their return.

The trolls and Gangdor each had big chests in hand, while the rest carried their own equipment and supplies to head towards the depths of the forest. Without the right equipment to transport their belongings, there were still many goods and supplies that they had no choice but to leave at base.

It had only taken a few minutes for Richard to decide whether to leave them or destroy them. He'd followed his intuition— after all, it was no big deal to leave this equipment here. With Baron Forza's strength, the most he could do was hold on to these items for now. When he returned, he would recover it all with interest.

The path leading to the northwest wasn't a proper road. There were small tracks that snaked deep into the mountains and untouched forest, with most of the area deserted. The only people who passed by this area were adventurers. Despite all that, Richard steered clear of the beaten path to avoid being tracked. He signalled the broodmother to pave a new path for them a few kilometres away, parallel to the existing one. Safety wouldn't be a problem— any dangers the broodmother passed through would be completely swept away.

And thus, the troops progressed smoothly along this new path. The forest was deathly quiet, with no beasts in sight. There were still a few ruins of goblin camps and the like along the way, but none of them had any life.

They walked for an entire day in the lifeless and unchanging surroundings. Everyone except Richard slowly started to tire, and even the trolls who were in such high spirits that they were cracking jokes at the beginning started to quiet down. Having been in this desolate forest for a significant amount of time, everyone was starting to feel a measure of gloom in their souls.

Only Richard knew the reason for this. The path had been paved

by the broodmother, so any dangerous beasts along the way had become food. Those that were lucky enough to escape death steered clear of this place once they smelt its presence.

Richard suddenly stopped in his tracks, closing his eyes as he seemingly tried to make sense of something. There was a clear fluctuation in his sea of consciousness, as the number of raptors near the broodmother started to drop. Three of the lit spots in his mind's vision had disappeared in the blink of an eye.

“Broodmother, what’s wrong?” Richard asked in alarm.

“There is a really unusual, strong enemy here, Master. I might need your help,” the broodmother replied. This startled Richard—this was the first time the broodmother had asked him for help. He immediately identified its location, relieved to find that they were less than ten kilometres apart.

Book 2, Chapter 53

Necromancer

“What’s wrong, boss?” Gangdor asked.

Richard blinked open his eyes, replying, “Get ready, we’re going into battle! And it could be a bitter one this time.”

Gangdor was stunned for a moment, but then he burst out into a wide grin, “That’s great!”

Waterflower gently pursed her lips together, but her eyes lit up as well. Most of the rest were equally pumped up upon hearing the news— they’d been walking through this dreary forest for too long, and it would be good to have some action to revive their drooping spirits.

Once he’d figured out the broodmother’s whereabouts, Richard rushed towards the battleground. The ground terrain shifted to a downwards slope in a few kilometres, before a swamp shrouded in grey fog came into view.

The broodmother’s huge body was hard to spot in the thick fog, occasionally flitting out of sight. Everyone who saw it was taken aback for a moment, and even the troll brothers stopped abruptly in their tracks at the sight of the two metre tall and six metre long creature. Medium Rare scratched his head in astonishment, unable to believe his eyes.

The broodmother was in the midst of battle, screeching continuously as it slowly moved its bulky body, spraying acid in all directions. Its large, sunken belly expanded and contracted regularly, sending greenish-yellow liquid spurting out from all its folds. The rancid odour could be smelt from miles away, and even the trolls who were resistant to corrosive damage wouldn’t dare rush into this mist that was as strong as a grade 6 spell.

Richard squinted. Even though the fog and acid spray made for

poor visibility, he could see that the broodmother was fighting over a hundred undead creatures. And to add to that, an uncountable number of undead were crawling out of the fog without end.

Around it were many wounded raptors fighting a significant number of the undead for their very lives. Even though these creatures were only low-level skeletons and zombies, no matter how hard the raptors bit or how fast they threw themselves at these opponents it was impossible to have them back down. Breaking an arm or leg would hardly affect these creatures, the only way to victory being destroying them to bits.

Worse still, the acid fog from the broodmother had limited effect on undead. Although it caused the bones to decay and break, it took some time for these creatures to stop moving from just that. It was actually easier for the raptors to rip them to shreds with their bladed limbs.

The battle was taking place on the edge of the swamp, and there was mud everywhere. These conditions made it difficult for the raptors to exercise their superior agility, and the zombies and skeletons poured forth relentlessly. The raptors were almost all out of energy, and it seemed like they were about to be overpowered. Waves of about ten skeletons and zombies surged forth without end, completely cornering them and pressuring them deeper into the sludge.

There were many skeletons and zombies crawling all over the broodmother's body, with hundreds more nearby. However, the limited offensive power of these creatures left their damage to it insignificant, unable to breach the outer shell.

Where had all these undead come from?

“Broodmother, stop the acid fog!” Richard realised that the acid wasn't doing much to the opponents, instead only causing his own army to be afraid of approaching.

At that very moment, however, strong mana emanated from the swamp and attacked the broodmother. Its actions immediately grew sluggish, and it let out a shrill cry. Being one with the broodmother in soul, Richard felt his consciousness being penetrated by a needle, as if a ray of light had swept across his brain and blanked it out. This was only momentary, however, as the remaining contracts lit up and divided the damage. He regained consciousness just as suddenly as he had lost it, with a throbbing pain to remind him that it wasn't just a fantasy.

This was a soul spell, Mind Flay!

Even as the broodmother's consciousness blanked out, another wave of mana emanated from the swamp. This time, it caused the broodmother to lose control of its body, and even if it only took a split second to recover that control Richard could feel the substantial effects of that second wave.

Mind Control! Many skilled mages believed this spell to be the first step to controlling a magical creature, cast just before Enslave.

Richard and the broodmother were connected via soul, and there was a soul contract between him and Waterflower as well. There were four other members of the party contracted to him on top of that. If this opponent wanted to exert control over the broodmother, they would have to do the same to everyone else he was linked to. How could that be possible? Richard, Gangdor, the two trolls, and Olar all had steadfast determination.

However, the most unexpected member of this battle was Waterflower. The young lady's thoughts had always been pure and simple, her soul as clear as a glass of water. Once she grew aware of the attempt at control, she erupted with power.

The short self-cut hair on her head stood up, as she opened her mouth with a sharp hiss. She let loose a burst of unadulterated killer instinct, countering the source of the attack. Despite his initial surprise, Richard didn't hesitate to channel his own mental

power over, stoking that desire to kill even more.

An indistinct roar sounded from the centre of the swamp, and all the undead stilled for a moment before moving again. Now, however, it was evident that they were sluggish, disorderly, and chaotic, unlike the originally ordered swarm.

Richard gritted his teeth with a cold glint in his eyes, “There should be a necromancer somewhere here. To think he has the guts to try and control my broodmother, what guts! This fellow really has an appetite!”

He stretched out his right hand, shouting loudly, “Sword!”

An armed knight passed Richard his unnamed sword, and Flowsand silently walked over before reaching out to touch it. The tip of the sword instantly lit up with sacred fire.

Waterflower’s eyes lit up, and she quietly placed the Shepherd of Eternal Rest before Flowsand. The cleric lifted her gaze to eye the girl, before reaching her hand out to the cloth sheath of the sword.

“This is great!” Gangdor exclaimed loudly, daringly extending his axe over as well. Every weapon was burning with sacred flames not long after, and according to Flowsand it would last nine minutes corresponding to her level.

The broodmother followed Richard’s orders to climb out of the swamp, slowly approaching the army. The curtain of acid fog was left behind, while the ten surviving raptors managed to extricate themselves from the weak undead and began drawing closer to Richard. As for the rest, Richard could see their corpses sink into the mud.

He took large strides to the edge of the swamp, lightly waving his sword to slice two skeletons in half. He then followed up with a slash to a zombie’s stomach.

“Whoever is inside, listen up. I’m giving you one chance—SURRENDER IMMEDIATELY!” Boosted by mana, his voice echoed

throughout the swamp.

Book 2, Chapter 54

Necromancer(2)

The only answer Richard's question got was a deluge of skeletons and zombies. He raised his burning sword in response, slowly pointing it forward. All sorts of howls and roars erupted from behind him, as the ferocious monsters that were his party led the army forward, pouncing towards the group of undead.

The fastest of the lot was Waterflower, bounding across the sludge like it was level ground as she flitted past Richard into the midst of the undead. Flowers bloomed in her path, looking quite like lotuses as the enemies were set aflame like torches of holy fire. The sheer effectiveness of Flowsand's flames far surpassed anyone's imagination, as even a thousand enemies melted away like butter without the ability to withstand a single blow.

The opponents were cleared up quickly, and the party came up to the centre of the swamp. As if on cue, the holy flames at the tip of Richard's blade disappeared.

A lone island appeared in Richard's sight, with an attention-grabbing two-storey building upon it. The place looked crude and dilapidated, apparently having already been around for quite a while.

A lanky man was stood by the door, looking at least thirty years old. The unkempt hair, dark circles, and pale skin would leave a deep impression on anyone, and his robes were so filthy that it was impossible to tell what they once looked like. His lips were dried out, looking an ashen green. If not for the slight rise and fall of his chest, he would seem no different from a zombie himself.

Richard stepped foot on the little island, his sword screeching against the ground. He narrowed his eyes at the man in front of the building, speaking dully, "You dare to try and control my contract beast. The guts! Is this considered robbing me?"

The man furrowed his brows, his eyes stuck on Flowsand. A hoarse and unpleasant voice sounded out, “What a terrifying cleric!”

It was only then that he scanned the rest of the party, his eyes narrowing at the sight of Waterflower. That mental counterattack had evidently etched a strong impression, or rather great pain, onto his mind.

At the end of it all, his gaze landed on Richard once more. “You’re a mage?” He couldn’t help but frown, asking that question with uncertainty. He’d felt great sword skills from Richard during the battle, but now he was feeling powerful mana from the boy.

“Mm, level 9,” Richard answered calmly.

Richard had tossed over a detection spell while the man was judging the rest, and strangely enough he seemed not to have noticed it as he didn’t shield himself with his mana. The results had left him slightly surprised— this was a level 12 necromancer with six rune slots and upto 90 points of capacity!

The necromancer gave Richard a close look, “Well then, esteemed sir, I would like to duel you based on magic tradition. Although I am of a higher rank, I’ve already lost all of my servants and have less than a quarter of my mana remaining. My request is not unfair.”

“Magic tradition?” Richard asked, an underlying meaning to his words, “Do other mages consider you one of their kind?” Outside of the abyss, hell, and planes that leaned towards evil, even places under control of dark gods had no favour for necromancers who played with souls and disturbed the peace of the dead.

The man’s expression changed, immediately growing malicious and twisted as he howled, “That’s true. Since everyone believes us to be evil and blood-thirsty, then so be it! I hid myself here because I don’t wish to kill with abandon, but you still come knocking at my door. Since you aren’t willing to acknowledge my right as a

mage, then come at me together! I'LL TEAR YOU ALL APART!"

Richard took a close look at the necromancer, the dancing numbers in his vision gradually growing clear. It was true that the necromancer didn't have much mana left, and basically all of his permanent familiars had been killed. A necromancer without undead was like a knight without a mount.

He quickly decided on his next tactics, "Although you aren't acknowledged by the rest of the mages, I am still willing to duel you based on tradition."

"My Lord! There's no need for that, is there? Can't we all just swarm and defeat him like when you dealt with Menta?" Olar asked from the side. He was the last person whose weapon was enchanted by Flowsand, and the holy flames on his arrows would be a huge threat to the necromancer.

Richard waved his hand to stop the bard, "No, this one is different. He's a mage."

A mage? While the necromancer was a mage indeed, Olar could not understand why they needed to treat mages and melee fighters differently.

On the other hand, the necromancer's stiff face changed. He adjusted his robes, taking two steps forward to state solemnly, "I am Zendrall, a level 12 necromancer."

Richard buried his sword into the mud without much thought, taking a step forward himself, "Richard. Level 9 mage, and runemaster."

The word 'runemaster' sent a sliver of doubt flashing across Zendrall's face. He'd evidently never heard of such a profession. However, they quickly moved on to the duel, facing each other with twenty metres of distance between them.

Although it was impossible to tell what spell Zendrall began casting because of the different language, a dark grey magic

formation immediately appeared in front of the necromancer. A dense power of death pervaded the air, and power surged into the throbbing formation, as if some live creature wanted to break out. Richard's senses told him that this would be a Summon Undead spell, and with Zendrall's level a powerful undead creature would soon appear on the plane.

The formation pulsed with negative energy, sending out terror and darkness into the minds of those nearby. The creature already had such great spiritual power before even appearing, making it obvious that this was a powerful formation. The only downside was the duration of the cast.

Richard had no intent of casting a spell himself, instead retrieving the remnant page of the Book of Holding as he silently activated it with a shake of his hands. Five direwolves immediately appeared on the battlefield, howling as they pounced onto the necromancer together. Dozens of blue and green lights did their utmost to protect the necromancer's body, but a crackling sound rang out very quickly. His defensive spell had been damaged, and although two of the wolves were sent flying he was pushed back as well. The summoning spell he was halfway through was naturally interrupted.

Richard patiently waited until Zendrall could hold on no longer, raising his hand and dispelling the spell to break the direwolves down into pure mana. The shield spell had been completely decimated under their attack, and the necromancer's already shabby clothes were almost turned into mere strips of cloth. There were bruises and injuries all over his body, but his fatal points were still protected even though on the verge of breaking down. None of the injuries he'd sustained would kill him.

Zendrall struggled to sit up as Richard drew closer. He tidied up his tattered robes, "To be able to die in a fair duel is my honour. Do it!"

Richard gazed at Zendrall, "Are you that eager to die?"

“Of course not! I still have far too many hypotheses to test... But I am an evil necromancer, not tolerated by any humans. If someone finds out, I will be burnt at the stake,” Zendrall laughed bitterly.

Indeed. Even in Norland necromancers were few in number, considered the enemy of all living souls.

Book 2, Chapter 55

The Bloodstained Lands

"Although I gave you the duel you wished for, you are still a necromancer..." Zendrall's expression dimmed at Richard's initial words, but what followed reignited his hope, "However, I can consider giving you a chance. After all, a level 12 great mage is worthy of respect. But know this: before I make my final decision, you are my captive. I hope that as a necromancer you remain as noble as any other mage. I'm taking a huge risk here, if you try to escape or attack..."

Zendrall didn't care about the pain all over his body, straightening up as he spoke proudly, "In terms of magic, I am no worse than a great mage. Furthermore, my pride and dignity are even greater than those of mages who have been corrupted by mortal pleasures! I swear in the name of the Lich King, I shall do nothing unbefitting of my status in my captivity. However, I would like to ask why you wish to capture me. If you plan to offer me to any kingdom, then please execute me now. I am not willing to be nailed to a stake and burnt for display!"

Richard rummaged through some information from his memory, speaking calmly, "I suppose I will be heavily rewarded or blessed if I offered a level 12 necromancer to a king or a god."

Zendrall remained silent for a moment, but then spoke up, "Indeed. At the very least, you can become a titled knight if you offer me to a king or a grand duke. The amount of divine grace you will earn for sacrificing me to a god will be great as well, enough to advance a priest to level 10."

Richard nodded, but before he could say anything Flowsand chimed in from behind him, "Necromancers would also make a great sacrifice to the Eternal Dragon. Although there isn't any church here, we can perform the sacrifice through the Book of

Time.”

Richard’s gaze at Zendrall immediately changed with Flowsand’s words. The expression on the necromancer’s face clearly wasn’t great either. The cleric’s holy flames had caused such great damage to his undead that he feared her despite her lower level.

Looking over him a few times, Richard shook his head and sighed, “Although I’m reluctant to give up on such a blessing, there is no need to worry. I won’t be offering you to a god or king, for now at least. Our destination in this trip is the Bloodstained Lands, with only robbers, slavers, and barbarians. There is no king there, nor even a grand duke. However, even though the vow to the Lich King proves your sincerity, it is not enough. It is evident that our beliefs are completely different, you need to persuade me to believe in you.”

“Please wait a minute,” Zendrall said with a nod. He went back into the small, run down building, coming out shortly after with an exquisite box that he handed over to Richard.

“This is a magic box made out of a devil’s skull that I prepared for myself. If I can advance to level 16, I am prepared to turn myself into a lich when my life nears its end. This is my future phylactery, a priceless tool for a necromancer.”

Richard nodded, stowing the item away, “Welcome, Zendrall. We now have another member on our team for the journey to the Bloodstained Lands!”

While Zendrall spent time packing his items, Richard stood in front of the broodmother and fed it some magic crystals that it had asked for.

One would truly feel the creature’s formidable size when standing close. When the black shell filled one’s entire vision, they would feel a sense of oppression that made it seem like they were facing a black hole. Even with his connection to it, Richard felt the awe of its form was a little too strong.

He threw the crystals out one by one, and the broodmother devoured them instantly. It stopped after twenty pieces, laying down quietly for a few minutes. Then, there was a sudden crackling sound from within its shell as its conscience flared up once more.

“Master, I now have enough energy to advance to level 2. You need to choose another ability for me to strengthen, either for myself, or for the attack drones.

“There are three options if you wish to strengthen me— speed, defence, or the pace of creation of drones. As for the drones themselves, you can strengthen the raptors further or choose to add one of two new forms.”

Richard’s mind was immediately flooded with information on the two new attack drones. One was a blood-sucking creature that resembled a bat, a fast-moving flighted beast with great perception that could be used to scout ahead. Although these things weren’t strong in combat alone, a swarm of them would grow to be terrifying especially since they could develop toxicity in the future. A single egg from the broodmother could hatch one raptor, but if he wanted these then it could hatch six.

As for the second type of attack drones, they were wind wolves. These creatures looked exactly the same as ordinary wolves, except their claws were extraordinarily large. They were also quite fast, able to move quickly through complicated terrain. For offense, their characteristic ability to shoot wind blades made them special, the effects being the same as the magic spell. The recovery cycle was about the same as a human mage, and they could cast the spell thrice in a day. Overall, they were comparable to level 7 soldiers in terms of comprehensive combat ability.

With a sufficient number of wind wolves guarding it, the broodmother would not have been so badly harassed at the battle by the swamp. The range of the sharp wind blades would have been of great help in a group battle.

After repeated consideration, Richard decided to start off by increasing the broodmother's agility. Although it was strong in combat, its slow movement had now become its achilles' heel. He then set aside twenty more crystals for it to eat, allowing it to gain the ability to birth wind wolves.

The basic consideration behind everything had been survival. Wind wolves looked no different from normal demonic wolves, and be it humans, orcs, or barbarians, everyone had a tradition of domesticating them. It wouldn't be odd for this team to have ten wolves alongside them.

Once Richard's team set off on their journey once more, the broodmother had finished its transformation. Its carapace had grown openable at the chest, revealing translucent organs that had reduced in weight by a third. The tiny limbs molted off, replaced by new, thicker, and stronger ones. Once the mutation was complete, the broodmother could move at ten kilometres per hour. Even if this was still slow, it was twice of what it could manage before.

The broodmother's mind grew stronger and clearer with this upgrade, and it contacted Richard once more, "Master, if you find statues or altars of ancestral worship, please bring them to me. I'm in dire need of divine power; if I get enough, I can both accelerate my progress and possibly form my second mind."

"Second mind?" Richard asked.

"A new consciousness, able to think independently and assist in commanding the attack drones. It will greatly elevate my combat capabilities."

"Ancestral worship..." Richard noted the request down, immediately thinking back to the statue of Neian back in Forza's lands. However, the broodmother answered that it could not absorb the divine power of a true god yet, and that such a feat would only be possible after it reached level 7.

The team passed through mountains and forests, but three more wind wolves surrounded them every day. As they reached the borders, Richard decided to have his team speed on as he left the raptors with the broodmother for protection and hunting. The broodmother would slowly move through the area that was abundant with food and without any enemy, replenishing its energy as Richard found a base to set up in.

Ten days later, they finally made their way out into a vast, desolate world.

Book 2, Chapter 56

The Bloodstained Lands(2)

This was a world of red, yellow, and brown. Small rock formations were everywhere, making for a forest of weathered stones. Endless canyons and caves made for complex terrain with numerous hiding spots, an unknown number of dangers hiding in the shadows.

This land was barren, with almost nothing to be seen but rock and sand. There were a few shrubs to be sighted on occasion at the foot of a rock, but there was no river in this vast land that flowed through the year. Numerous small streams did flow during the rains, but they dried up as summer arrived. A handful of oases decorated the land like pearls, becoming centres of power.

There were a few parts of the Bloodstained Lands that were rich in resources, but they were all close to the barbarian ancestral spirit planes in the west. Countless battles there had turned the once-fertile land barren, painting it with blood.

Richard took a deep breath as a gust of wind blew their way, immediately feeling a dry heat rushing up his nose alongside a few grains of coarse sand. Two scorching suns hung up in the sky, their boiling light pouring fire onto the dry land. If one looked into the distance, the red pillars of stone would look like burning torches.

Just the day before, they were struggling with the dark and damp of the forest. And now that they'd left the mountains, they'd entered a completely different world.

Countless villains, gangs, and robbers lived on this land, the hands of the slavers stained with the blood of various races. A majority of the Bloodstained Lands were barren, but the place was also full of opportunities. Most of the specialty products from the barbarian plains could be sold for astronomical prices in civilised society, with compelling alchemic treasures and magic goods to be

found.

It was rumoured that there were several mysterious death zones deep into the Bloodstained Lands, places where the fabric of spacetime was distorted. Exotic foreign creatures roamed the land, but there were also ruins with valuable treasures buried within. Even though the distorted spacetime was a powerful opponent, countless adventurers remained attracted by the prospects of those treasures.

It was high noon, and within half an hour of entering the desert Richard was sweating hard. The others looked tired as well, so they had to look for a shady spot under a cliff to rest as they waited for the heat to subside.

Horses became extremely important in the Bloodstained Lands. All of the horses they'd seized from Baron Forza had been sent alongside the vanguard, successfully crossing through the Sequoia Kingdom to reach the Bloodstained Lands. The vanguard had two raptors with them, and through those Richard could keep tabs on the vanguard's location.

Once they were under the shadow of the peak, the group immediately collapsed to get a drink of water and some rest. Richard went out of the shade, squinting his eyes at the two suns that seemed motionless in the sky. He shook his head helplessly, turning around to shout, "Let's rest! It seems like we'll have to wait until the evening to set off!"

Thus, the men all struggled to get up and tidy some flat ground to rest upon. Medium Rare then set up some simple crockery, beginning to cook food for them all. Richard wiped the sweat from his forehead, returning to the shade and opening a map to study.

This map was very simple and lacking, not even outlining the entirety of the Bloodstained Lands. It was hand-drawn by rogues, so even if it did indicate the locations of several well-known oases and camps it could not be considered precise. If they used it as the

basis of their movements, they would end up deviating a great distance from their destination.

However, this simple map was a prize obtained from wiping out the Church of Valour. In this plane, maps were priceless.

The Bloodstained Lands were filled with unpredictable dangers. Outside of the oases and a few permanent neutral camps, a large part of the area was completely blank. There were only a few simple terms on the map, some pointing out well-known places and some even just naming locals. The true maps were in the hands of the slavers, who'd been navigating the place for years.

Richard had already marked a path on the corner of the map, filling out details of the terrain around the parts they'd already crossed. Precision allowed him to draw complicated magical formations with ease, so cartography wasn't too much of a problem.

Olar ran over to Richard's side, asking, "What are we going to do next, my Lord?"

Richard pointed to a camp symbol on the map, "We'll start by meeting up with the vanguard. Once we have horses, we can try our luck at Camp Bloodstone. We need to find a guide familiar with this area and look at what we can do."

Olar was puzzled, "Try our luck?"

Richard smiled, "We'll be settling down here. Aliens, scum, and the rubbish from everywhere are left here, and they'll make for natural allies. Here, nobody will care where we come from as long as we have the capabilities."

"Including barbarians?" the elven bard asked cautiously, although his expression was somewhat unnatural.

Richard cast an odd glance at him, "Of course!"

The unpleasant expression was followed up with a pale face. Richard wondered what the fellow had experienced that had left

such great trauma against barbarians.

Having sent Olar away, Richard walked over to Tiramisu and patted him on the back, “I need you to transcribe a few more magic scrolls. I heard that stuff is exorbitant in this plane, so we could potentially make a fortune. It will also help grow your mana pool.

“Speaking of, when do you expect to level up?”

Tiramisu scratched his head, “I’ll be level 10 in about a month.”

Trolls were different from humans, weaker in magic at the same level. A level 10 troll mage was about the same as a level 8 human.

Richard nodded, “Not bad! I’m really anticipating the day you get to level 12!”

Trolls were likely to experience a mutation at level 12, growing another head or evolving some rare bloodline ability. Even the most common additional head would be great, since the mage would be able to cast spells much faster that way.

After circling around and talking to everyone, Richard found a place to sit down. He took out a piece of hide, continuing to draft an unfinished rune. Some training had left him fully able to draw runes in any environment, be it the special dwarven alchemy tables back in the Deepblue or the small desk back on the Archeron island. Even the flat stone before him now was no matter, not affecting the precision of his formations at all.

This specific rune was Elementary Strength, being drafted for Gangdor. Richard would be able to make for a 30% boost given his current materials, making Gangdor’s strength equivalent to Menta’s. That would also greatly increase his combat capabilities.

Flowsand was sat beside Richard, watching as he drafted the rune. “It’s not easy to lead, is it?” she asked.

The pen didn’t stop, the line remaining flat and neat, “Yes. I need to consider everyone and everything, and understand all your thoughts. I still need everyone in the future, I need to gain their

trust instead of relying on the contract that binds them. Besides, even if I want to I don't have any slave contracts left."

He continued to complete a curve, stowing his pen away as he said thoughtfully, "But trust seems hard to gain."

Flowsand smiled slightly, "You have already gained mine."

He flashed his own in response, "But there's still the others."

Flowsand brushed through his long hair, "That is easy. You just need to lead them to victory in a few more battles."

Richard nodded, "That's true."

"But you seem to have forgotten someone," she reminded him.

"Who?"

"Waterflower."

"Waterflower?" Richard found it strange at first, but immediately understood. Their souls were connected, allowing him to know the girl's location and summon her when he wanted, but this did not mean that he knew what she was thinking, whether she was happy or dejected. He'd neglected her for a long time.

"I understand now, thank you!"

Flowsand smiled slightly, "You don't have to thank me. I still look forward to the day you bring us back to Norland."

He replied profoundly, "I'm looking forward to the day before."

Flowsand was stunned for a moment, but then she pulled a long face before leaving with a snort. That look of surprise gave Richard a little sense of accomplishment.

Book 2, Chapter 57

A Chaotic Order

A bright, round moon rose up when night fell, illuminating all of the Bloodstained Lands. The stars decorating the sky seemed to be set apart from the unrest on the ground, leaving many pillars of rock that had been eroded faintly glimmering under the silver light. Under the bright moonlight, Richard led his party to rendezvous with the team that had set out earlier.

However, when he got to the meeting point all he saw was a group of injured soldiers. The horses were gone, and there were only twelve soldiers remaining.

Flowsand immediately set to task healing the wounded soldiers, while Richard made rounds around the wounded soldiers to look at their injuries. Afterwards, he approached the leader of the knights to ask, “Who is responsible for this?”

“They said they were Red Cossack’s men. They took an interest in our horses and offered a single gold coin per horse, a hundredth of the market value! They attacked us the moment I rejected them, with more than two hundred men and ten knights. Their strength far surpassed our team’s, and few of us escaped.”

There was a cut so deep on the knight’s back that his bone was almost showing. When he’d just met up with Richard, his wound was still discharging copious amounts of pus. Outside of that, he had more than ten other slashes of various sizes all over his body, showing the intensity of the battle.

“Red Cossack...” Richard repeated the name repeatedly, his face growing more pensive each time. He then asked, “Would you be able to recognise these attackers if you saw them again?”

“That goes without saying! Their leader was a knight who was at least level 13, wearing red armour and carrying a two-handed

sawtooth blade. He's easy to recognise."

Richard paced up and down, only stopping once Flowsand was done healing the troops. He patted the knight on his shoulder, letting out a sigh, "You did well to survive. We can still snatch those horses back later, but if you perished in battle where would I find such trustworthy people like you?"

It had become increasingly apparent to Richard that the knights Gaton had granted him were immensely valuable.

An expression of gratitude crossed the knight's face, and he struggled to perform a meticulous salute, "Serving Lord Gaton and the Archerons has always been our purpose in life!"

The knight had never viewed Richard as his master. He served Gaton and the Archerons. This was something Richard had sensed long ago, but he did not say anything especially since every other knight who heard this sentence felt the same way.

Such was the cohesiveness of the family, the legendary might of its leader. Their loyalty to Richard was an extension of their servitude to Gaton, and in the future they would do the same for Richard's son. Whoever led them, these knights served the Archerons as a family. Even Gaton's mention was because of his sheer contribution to the family, so much so that he compared to the most talented of predecessors. In another ten years, the man's achievements could surpass those of the ancestors.

Many of these knights had served the Archerons for generations. In return, the family had schooled and trained their young, giving them status, wealth, and the chance to advance. Those who excelled were given better protection for their families, relatives, and even their squads. They were like vines on fir trees in winter, depending on each other for support. This was the way of life for most noble families in Norland.

In the cool, refreshing winds of the early morning, Richard brought his troops over towards Camp Bloodstone. The sun's first

light started to slowly warm the desert, and eventually they were walking on boiling sand and burning stones. Beads of sweat started pouring out of Richard's forehead, but he had slowly gotten used to the dry heat as he steadily walked forward step by step. However, the name that had lost him half his soldiers and all his horses constantly popped up in his thoughts.

Red Cossack.

There were roads through the Bloodstained Lands as well, beaten paths made by the many passing travellers. These roads ended at neutral camps, areas with greenery and a water source. There were other roads formed by the passage of trade caravans, but as greenery dried up and camps changed, such roads grew smaller and eventually disappeared.

Walking through the hot weather for half an hour, Richard came across a small road. It wasn't paved or marked, just a surface that had been levelled by the passage of horses and vehicles. According to the marks on his map, following this for a few kilometres would allow them to reach the main road leading to Camp Bloodstone.

In part due to luck, Richard managed to make sense of the crude markings on the map. Sound judgements allowed him to take the correct path at every intersection, putting the party on the right track without much deviation.

However, the path in front of him looked blocked. A few sharp tree trunks had been joined together to make an artificial blockade between two large rocks, sealing almost all of the path except a few metres. A few vicious-looking men could be seen aimlessly wandering around behind, with a flag tied to the highest point of the structure. The flag was drooping down vertically with the lack of wind, containing the picture of a bloody scythe.

The Bloodstained Lands were quite traversable, and it would not be impossible to deviate from the main road. The only drawbacks were an increased chance of danger and a higher chance of getting

lost. Even though the path ahead was blocked, a short detour around the path would bring them back to their desired path. However, whoever had build this structure had made it obvious that such a thing would not be easy. These blockades were designed to deter anyone from entering or leaving Camp Bloodstone. Hiding would be useless.

Richard frowned slightly, walking towards the roadblock. Seeing the party from afar, a man behind the roadblock suddenly jumped up and blew hard on a whistle. Ten fierce, burly men stood up one after the other, grabbing their weapons as they rushed out from the sides of the rocks.

One hefty man walked aggressively to the front, wielding his axe with great force as he shouted loudly, “Hey! You people over there, come here now! This place belongs to Blood Scythe Mark, whoever is heading to Camp Bloodstone has to pay a toll!”

Roughly a hundred metres away from the roadblock, Richard stopped walking, “We are not going to Camp Bloodstone!”

The man was startled. With the direction that Richard was heading, it was inconceivable for him to not be heading towards Camp Bloodstone. If he was just passing through the Bloodstained Lands, he would not have turned this way. He gave it some serious thought— if this fellow wasn’t going to Camp Bloodstone, there was nowhere else for him to go.

At this point, a man who was at least half a head taller than the rest walked out as well. He slapped his counterpart who was still deep in thought on the head and angrily rebuked him, “IDIOT!”

He then pointed to Richard and howled out, “I don’t care whether you’re going to Camp Bloodstone. Now that we’ve seen you, you need to pay the toll. That’s an order from Chief Mark!”

Book 2, Chapter 58

A Lucrative Project

Richard led his troops towards the roadblock without a change in his expression, “We’re going to Camp Bloodstone to try our luck. How much is the toll per person? We didn’t pay a toll when we travelled this route in the past, do the people in Camp Bloodstone know about this blockade?”

The burly man sat down, gently stroking his battle-axe as he spoke menacingly, “One silver per person, two for the bigger ones. One look at your party and I know that you’re all a bunch of poor men. You don’t even have a horse but you want to try your luck at Bloodstone? Be good and hand over the toll. If you don’t have money, you can pay us with whatever you own. Once you pay your toll, you’ll receive a card. Nobody in Bloodstone will bully you if you have it. Blood Scythe Mark is the big boss of Bloodstone Camp!”

Richard frowned, “Isn’t Stormhammer the boss of Camp Bloodstone? Was there a change of leadership?”

The man’s complexion suddenly changed, and he spoke angrily, “Of course Stormhammer is still the boss, but Blood Scythe has a lot of say in the camp! Stop giving me your bullshit, and hand over the toll now!”

Medium Rare grew angry, baring his tusks and stamping the ground with force. He wanted to charge ahead, the earth shaking for a moment with the impact of his stomp.

Looking at the might of the large troll, the burly man’s expression immediately changed. He grasped his axe tightly to guard himself and shouted, “What are you lot up to?!” His companions behind him also grabbed their weapons and readied fighting stances.

Even though the burly man was not afraid of a full-grown troll, he did not dare underestimate Medium Rare either. This troll looked different from the rest.

By that time, Richard had been made fully aware of the situation behind the roadblock. There was a camp that could accommodate twenty to thirty people there, with 28 men waiting in tow including the ones they were talking to right now. They all had different kinds of weapons and armour, some leather and some iron. There were even some people with plate mail boots but a full suit of leather armour instead. Most of these people looked tanned and rosy, and it was difficult to say whether they were sunburned or a lot of dirt and grime had accumulated on their skin. The conditions surrounding the Bloodstained Lands made baths a luxury not all could afford.

Once all his observations were made, Richard was sure of the capabilities of these soldiers. The burly leader was around level 10, making him about the same as a novice knight. The rest were mostly between levels 5 and 8, but judging from their fierce expressions it was obvious that they were used to seeing blood. The Bloodstained Lands really lived up to their name— a mere roadblock had a group of soldiers equivalent to veterans and captains outside.

Richard reached for a gold coin, tossing it to the burly leader, “We’re not up to any mischief, we’ll pay the toll. One gold coin should cover our group, no?”

The gold coin danced in the air, forming a high trail as it reflected blinding sunlight that made it difficult for everyone to open their eyes. One gold coin in the mainland was equal to a hundred and twenty silver. There were less than thirty people in Richard’s party, so even with the addition of the ten wind wolves the tax for passage would still be less than a single gold.

With a soft pop, the gold coin disappeared in the burly man’s hand. He unfolded his hand to closely inspect the beautiful gold

coin, suddenly inhaling a breath of warm air as he cried out lowly, “It’s a church coin!”

Even though the weights of the coins on the mainland were standardised in weight, there were different bodies that issued them. The three most common ones were the churches, the kingdoms, and other nobles. Church coins were the highest quality of the lot, with great craftsmanship that was not easy to replicate. This made them more valuable than the rest, being worth 150 silver.

The gold coin Richard tossed out came from the Church of Valour, but how he acquired it was a story for another day. Looking at the gold coin, the burly man’s eyes turned red with greed and the soldiers behind him grew even more excited.

They were only brought back from their daze after Richard coughed several times. Richard then asked, “We’ve given the toll, can you hand over the Blood Scythe card? Since I’ve already paid, I feel like a trip to Camp Bloodstone would be nice.”

The burly man put the gold coin in his pocket, making no effort to hide his greed as he spoke loudly, “No. One isn’t enough, I want two... No! Ten gold coins before I let you through!”

“Isn’t the tax per person one silver coin? How can it be inadequate?” Richard asked, but he already knew the answer.

“It’s one gold coin now!” The burly man proclaimed.

“When did it rise?” Richard asked

The burly man waved his double-edged axe with brute force and said, “Just a few moments ago!”

Another fighter walked up beside the burly man, poking him as he said, “Boss! They have women!”

The burly man stared at him and angrily cried out, “I don’t care about women! We’re here to collect tolls, not snatch girls! What kind of girls can’t we find back at camp if we have money? Your

brain is worthless!!”

The man cowered in fear at the lash, but he continued to insist, “Boss, these two are different. Please, look at them again.”

Only then did the burly man shift his gaze towards Richard’s companions. This was a very interesting bunch of troops— not only did they have two trolls, they had elves and more than ten domesticated wolves. He obviously didn’t know the difference between a wind wolf and a normal one. Even if he did not take them into consideration, Gangdor was also someone who would demand attention due to his large physique and aura of dominance. His outer appearance would even make one wonder if he was a strong barbarian warrior. Apart from Gangdor, the three novice knights from amongst the defected soldiers gave off awe-inspiring vibes as well. As for the two women in the party, Flowsand and Waterflower, they were wrapped from head to toe in long white robes to protect them from the strong heat and the sun’s glare. Even though their faces could not be seen clearly, their postures were graceful.

His gaze then fell on Waterflower’s legs. The young lady was still barefoot regardless of circumstance, and her snow-white legs stuck out from under the long robe. The tips of her feet were touching the ground lightly, as she stood there on the scorching sand and stone.

Looking at her pearly white legs, the burly man’s throat violently throbbed as he swallowed a large gulp of saliva.

Richard reached back into his bag, grabbing a fistful of coins. However, the man waved him away, “There’s no rush to hand over the toll. Hey, ladies! Take off your robes and show me what you have! If you’ll keep me company for a while, I won’t collect any toll from your party!”

Waterflower’s body slightly sunk down, as she spread open her ten sparkling toes to get a firm grip on the ground. This was a sign

that she was ready to strike. On the other hand, Richard let out a quick laugh and threw over ten gold coins in the air, the light even covering the charm of her legs for a moment.

The coins bumped into one another in the air, producing a melodious clang before they fell back into Richard's hand. Not a single one fell, displaying some of Richard's skill. With a crashing sound, Richard put all the gold coins back into his pouch. Smiling at the burly man, he asked, "How should I address you?"

"They call me Big Axe Sam!" The burly man proudly proclaimed, even waving his large axe a few times. Gangdor's expression turned ugly as he bowed his head slightly, glancing at his own big, thick axe. When he raised his head again, he shuffled his right foot in preparation to charge forward.

"Sam, I won't be paying the toll anymore. If you don't wish to die, please be loud in surrendering!" Richard smiled and waved his hands, "Capture them all! If they struggle, there's no need to hesitate to kill."

Just as he was done talking, a loud boom sounded as the party behind him surged forward. They threw themselves into the crowd, starting pure slaughter.

Book 2, Chapter 59

A Lucrative Project(2)

Sam raised his large axe up high, but just as he started a battle cry Waterflower had already passed by his side with a light hop off her toes. Her long white robe suddenly left her body, landing on his head like a cloud to cover it completely.

Sam was startled, and hurriedly stuck out his hand to get the robe off. However, once he raised his hand the back of his head was struck hard by the Shepherd of Eternal Rest. The young lady had struck him with the back of the blade, and with a dull thud the man's sturdy body fell straight to the ground even as the robe wrapped more tightly around his face. For a while, all he could feel was his head spinning as he saw stars all around him.

He tried to get up in a panic, but another heavy blow struck his head which almost knocked the wind out of him. Following that, a barrage of attacks trampled his strong body, giving him the illusion that he'd fallen from a hill and was being trampled by a pack of mammoths.

Richard, on the other hand, witnessed something else entirely. Once Waterflower got next to Sam and covered his head with her robe, she'd struck him down with the back of her blade. Afterwards, Gangdor had rushed forward to punch and kick the man's face, followed closely by Medium Rare as the group launched a joint attack on this enemy. Watching the trio attack him viciously without touching any critical organs, he couldn't help but let out a resigned sigh and cover his eyes. He'd thought such tactics only belonged in the underworld before.

The other side of the battle was different. A massacre ensued, as the troll magician cast out slows and various other curses. The elven bard boosted the spells with his own chants, leaving the two groups on completely different levels. Sam's troops were shocked

to discover Richard's army was more ferocious than even them, and their coordination was on a completely different level to their own. Half of them were beaten in a flash, with some of the cavalry surrounded by wind wolves and cut to pieces from all directions.

The battle was over quite quickly, and by the end of it all there were only eight live captives including Sam. A few unlucky ones had been killed by accident, too slow to surrender. Sam remained as fierce as before, but he was beaten so badly he could barely even stand.

Thus, Richard came into possession of more than ten horses and a small camp. The knights skillfully cleaned up the battlefield, looking through the spoils of war along the way. There were several passes to Bloodstone on Sam's body— it seemed like these troops really were only there to collect a toll before they grew greedy upon seeing Richard's money and the women of his party.

Even as they were cleaning up, Olar wasted no time in interrogating the captives. He'd learned many interrogation and torture skills from Richard, and was exceptionally talented at their use. Perhaps a large contributor to that was the fact that he had no moral bottom line.

On the other hand, Richard walked around the camp and the blockade, observing everything. He finally stopped in front of the simple barricades, pondering over some things silently.

It took a while before he suddenly flashed Flowsand a smile, "I just had a new idea. At least I know that we can make money off this land in the future!"

"Robbery would be fastest," Waterflower interjected as she passed him.

Richard was startled, but to everyone's surprise he nodded, "Mm, that's more or less what I thought of. At least in essence, that is."

"You really want to steal?" Flowsand was stunned. However,

Richard knew that her only concern was whether the profits would match the risks they would take.

“Robbery? That’s a good way to make a living!” Medium Rare said from not far away.

Some of the people had puzzled expressions, with others skeptical and still more excited. Richard continued, “The idea is essentially the same. Let’s set up roadblocks to collect tolls.”

Tolls?

Everyone was left at a loss as to how this would be a profitable enterprise. This camp they’d just uprooted had almost nothing valuable, except the horses and perhaps the people themselves. Selling them off as slaves would be a way to turn a small profit.

Richard had no plans to explain himself. This was only a preliminary idea, but he would have to wait for his power to extend throughout the Bloodstained Lands, before he used these roadblocks as a form of control. Wealth would flow freely then, and by his calculations the total income he stood to make was an extremely shocking figure.

Looking at the captives, Richard could sense that everyone but Sam was terrified. The burly man had been beaten badly with his face covered, and the thuggy fight had left him feeling utterly humiliated. What’s worse, he didn’t even see how his underlings lost and died.

Sam’s men were fugitives, relying on instinct and fierceness to battle. On the other hand, everyone in Richard’s army from Waterflower to his own knights to the surrendered ones were from the military or had been otherwise rigorously trained as killing machines. There was no room for comparison between an angry mob and an elite fighting force.

Richard walked in front of the captives, taking out a white handkerchief to wipe his already pristine hands. He spoke slowly

and politely, “All of you are under my charge from now. If anyone is thinking to exploit my kindness, do think of that pile of corpses over there that used to be your companions. My name is Richard Archeron, and I will only show you grace this once. Attempt a revolt or escape, and only death awaits you.

“Moreover, I can promise you...” he paused, “... The process will be slow, and painful.”

The speech proved quite effective. Richard swept his eyes across the crowd, to see even Sam slightly cowering. He quickly glanced at the man before returning his gaze to his long, clean fingers. His hands were like a woman’s— elegant and fair. They were also the source of various runes and spells. He wiped once more as he spoke gently, “Sam, I will always be watching you.”

These words sent a strange chill down the burly man’s spine. He couldn’t help but break out into a cold sweat.

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The troops quickly packed up and left. Richard and his core party now had horses, while the nine captives walked. Zendrall was especially quiet amongst the eight from the Bloodstained Lands. He didn’t look strong, but that strange deathly-pale complexion with a tinge of cyan made him look like a zombie. Sam and the others subconsciously tried to keep their distance from the necromancer.

Flowsand and Richard walked shoulder to shoulder, her white cloak wrapping the whole of her body to leave only her amber eyes visible. She looked at Richard and let out a faint smile, “That went well, didn’t it?”

Richard couldn’t help but nod as he asked, “How did you know that it would scare them?”

“I’m an official of god,” she replied, “The study of religion is also the study of the will of the people. Of course I know the kind of

threats that would scare them...”

Looking at Richard’s unrelenting gaze, Flowsand knew that this was not an answer he would accept. Of course, she’d known that from the start. She spoke seriously, “Fugitives like these don’t fear threats, and they’re not afraid of blood. They don’t even fear death. The only kinds of people they’re afraid of are lunatics and maniacs.”

Richard snorted with an unnatural smile and continued to ask, “What else?”

“What else?” Flowsand’s voice sounded like she was trying to hold in her laughter, “There is nothing else. I’m just telling you that you’re suited to such a role, so they got scared of you!”

“Suited? Suited for what? A lunatic or a maniac?” Richard raged, but controlled his volume in fear of letting the others hear him.

Flowsand bluntly said, “Both!”

Richard was at a loss for words. After what seemed like forever, he managed to stutter out, “What about you? What are you afraid of?”

Flowsand replied immediately, “A man who does not keep his promises.”

Richard was rendered speechless once more, but her words lingered on in his head. He felt there were so many things held inside them that hadn’t been mentioned out loud.

Book 2, Chapter 60

Ruffian

The army gradually made their way out, the dead warriors and horses left abandoned. This was a tradition of the Bloodstained Lands—once the humans left vultures, hyenas, and scavenging rats would feast on the corpses until only bone remained. It was considered the only way for the spirits of the dead to break away from the curse that plagued this land, moving on to the afterlife.

The wind wolves were left behind as well. They needed food, and the horse carcasses would do. However, unlike the scavengers of the Bloodstained Lands they would also eat the bones. Unless there wasn't enough food available, Richard wouldn't allow them to eat human remains.

Camp Bloodstone finally came into view by the evening, although it was still distant. The place was in the middle of stony peaks, with a crude wall erected between the natural rock formations to form a barrier. There was a watch tower built on top of the camp, giving them extensive warning of anything that came their way. A skilled archer would be able to shoot down anything in the camp from this position.

As the camp approached, the intelligence reports he'd acquired about it started to flow through Richard's mind. Camp Bloodstone was close to the fringe of the Bloodstained Lands, not far from the Sequoia Kingdom and the Blackwater Duchy. It was an important stronghold for both adventurers and caravans alike leaving from the human countries, but the permanent residents of the place only numbered about 2000 people at most. At the limit, there could be as much as five thousand people travelling in and out of the place, the limit of the eight underground springs that provided the place with water.

Of the eight springs in Camp Bloodstone, four were under the

control of a half-orc tribe called the bloodstone orcs. The remaining were split between four weaker points of power with the Blood Scythe, Mark, being one of them.

The head of the bloodstone orcs was called Stormhammer, and he was the most powerful person in the camp. The level 14 warrior was a force to be reckoned with, be it in his own capacity or due to the hundred ferocious half-orcs he controlled. His was an imposing presence, giving him a lot of say in Camp Bloodstone. Even in a human kingdom the half-orc would easily have been knighted, so in a small territory like Camp Bloodstone his status was a given.

Mark the Blood Scythe, Chiron the Cyclops, Bowen the Lamé, and Howie the Razor were the remaining four centres of power. Each of them had a hundred soldiers themselves for the most part, individually ranging from level 12 to 14. Howie was a level 14 warrior himself, but rumours were abound that he would never dare challenge Stormhammer.

Mark had now become Richard's first target. He was a fierce and cruel man, a level 13 warrior who fought with two heavy, enchanted short-handle scythes. Outside of his innate strength he possessed no special abilities, making him an easy target for Richard. With his current army, he had many ways of dealing with this man who was only high in level.

As Richard was deep in thought, he subconsciously started wiping his spotless hands once more on horseback. He only stopped daydreaming when he caught a glimpse of Flowsand holding back her laughter. After a moment of embarrassment, he suddenly figured out why and calmly put the handkerchief away.

A few half-orcs stood guard at the camp's gate, and the arrival of Richard's army sent them into a small frenzy. After all, there were two conspicuous trolls and more than ten wind wolves amongst them, making for a formidable group. The most important thing was that Richard's group was made of unfamiliar faces, and it didn't look like a caravan. It was obvious from the formation that

they weren't ordinary adventurers either, so their experience and intuition told the soldiers that this was a sign of trouble.

"What are you here for?" the leader asked.

Olar passed over the blood scythe pass to the man, pointing at Richard as he spoke, "My master would like to obtain some good wares from the barbarian plains, and we're here to try our luck. We've already paid the toll." This was a script they'd agreed to earlier.

The half-orc leader looked at the pass, and then back at the crowd. He looked at Richard who had a cold, arrogant expression on his face, before letting out two breaths, "Mark, that son of a bitch! There's no toll to enter Camp Bloodstone, and this pass is worthless without any benefits. That fellow is hated, I suggest you throw this pass in the trash. If you've already paid him, you're of no use to him unless you're willing to give him more."

"Thank you, my friend," Olar said sincerely, handing over a few coins.

The half-orc seemed to relax after taking the money, but he still spoke up, "Orcs and elves can never be friends, but I still wish you good luck. Go ahead!"

He then had the passage opened with a wave.

A pungent odour assaulted the party's nostrils the moment they entered the camp. It was a mix of excrement, rotting food, trash, and the scent of slaves who had never showered. It stung hard, like a grade 6 acid fog. The party's expressions warped in disgust for a while, the two trolls being the most affected. They loved food the most, and their noses were particularly sensitive.

There were buildings of varying heights all over the camp, their walls seemingly made of weathered red rock. It was obvious that not much thought had been given to the place's construction, the infrastructure likely formed over a long period of disorderly

growth and territorial war. However, it was still relatively easy to tell the distribution of power amongst the springs, with tall walls separating the streets from the buildings whenever one was nearby.

In the middle of the camp was a five-storey building that looked like a castle. Several sharp, wooden stakes extended into the sky from the walls, giving the structure a strong orcish flair. There were several flags flying from the castle, a background of dark red with a warhammer dripping blood on the front. This was the flag of the bloodstone orcs.

Outside of the castle, the other buildings in the camp had no style to speak of, especially so in the west which was home to a large ghetto. The 'houses' in the area were crudely built, the walls made of piled rocks and the roof's materials indiscernible. They were so short any adult human would have to bend down to enter, and it was unlikely the buildings would even survive the entrance of someone like Gangdor or the trolls. The places was littered with garbage and stale water, so many flies buzzing around they were like black clouds hovering on top.

As Richard was passing by a small alley, he happened to witness a few shabbily dressed but fierce-looking men surrounding a sack on the floor. They were relentlessly punching and kicking the sack, and one of them was even attacking with a spiked wooden club. Every hit left a dark stain on the sack's surface.

The sack twisted and turned, leaving an indistinct sound coming from within. It likely contained a human given the size, but the people surrounding it were unrelenting in their attacks, harbouring an intent to kill.

Richard stopped his horse, sweeping his gaze over the attackers as he frowned without saying a word. These people were just ordinary folk, but they were committing such violence in public without remorse that their insane thirst for blood made him feel a little uncomfortable. If this craziness was rampant throughout the

Bloodstained Lands, he would have to adjust his conquest to accommodate. He would have to make the kind of adjustments Flowsand had in mind.

The men realised they were being watched, stopping to turn around and stare at Richard. They were skinny and dirty, with no physical strength to speak of, but their bloodshot eyes made them look very fierce. It was obvious that Richard's party outnumbered them, and the two trolls looked formidable at first glance, but this did not deter them at all. One of them even raised his head and shot Richard a look of contempt, the provocation in it obvious.

Book 2, Chapter 61

Ruffian(2)

These people were a bunch of rabid dogs. Even with a dragon standing in front of them, they would still jump forward and try to take a bite or two first.

An older man took two steps forward, tapping the bloodstained spiky club in his hand as he spoke menacingly, “Oi kid, there’s nothing fun to watch here!”

Richard’s eyes narrowed slightly, as he pointed out two men and said lightly, “I hate those eyes. And this old fellow has clearly lived too long.”

He’d barely finished speaking when Waterflower appeared in front of the first in a flash. She stuck her two fingers in, gouging his eyes out in a flash without mercy. At the same time, the ground shook as Medium Rare rushed forward with large strides, his hammer twirling around. A dull bang echoed in the air— he’d hammered the old fellow who was brandishing his club into the wall, reducing him to a ball of flesh and blood that could barely be recognised as once human.

Looking at the bloodshed, fear finally flashed on the faces of the other three men. They turned to escape, but a bowstring resonated thrice in a row. Olar had responded to Richard’s gestured command, sending an arrow through their backs. The three men were rendered motionless, collapsing at once.

A few of the impoverished commoners nearby slowly straightened themselves. From the looks of it, they seemed to be the ones who lived in the shacks nearby. They’d paid no heed to the violence before, but the toughness of these foreigners seemed to finally stir something in them.

An old man with grizzled hair stared at Richard, saying slowly,

“You have formidable power, Sir, but you should not abuse it.”

Another robust middle-aged man spoke broodingly, “This is Bowen’s territory, and we are his subordinates. He isn’t to be messed around with!” He crossed his hands over his chest as he spoke, gripping tightly to have his fingers crackle.

Richard didn’t say anything, merely pointing at the latter. Gangdor took big bounds over, landing a ruthless punch on the man’s face. The hammer-like fist distorted his figure, blood and teeth falling out of his mouth as the sturdy fellow was sent flying into the wall. He collapsed into the dark, humid, shack, not a sound to be heard from him again.

Gangdor maintained his fighting stance, grinning in a display of his pearly white teeth to everyone nearby before he gradually pulled his fists back and returned to Richard’s troops.

Richard’s piercing gaze fell on the elderly man, its intensity making him feel throbs of stabbing pain that forced him two steps back. It was only then that Richard spoke in a detached tone, “The use of power is in being able to gouge out the eyes of crazed dogs that glare at you. If any mongrel still wants to bite, I’ll kill them all.”

Richard looked at the man once more, continuing, “To me, you’re all no different from crazed dogs. The only humans are the ones hiding in their shacks.”

“As for Bowen the Lame...” Richard glanced at the middle-aged man who landed into the shack, “He’s not to be trifled with, sure, but that applies even more so to me.

“Does anyone still wish to say anything?” Richard’s gaze swept past the entire ghetto, and this time everyone subconsciously avoided his gaze without the guts to make any more comments.

Once they entered Camp Bloodstone proper, Richard chose a decent inn to settle down at that was under Stormhammer’s

sphere of governance. Unlike the other regions, this place was clearly safer. The half-orcs had built this camp, which meant that under most circumstances they could firmly uphold order. And thus, the price was also correspondingly high. Even twenty gold church coins only got Richard and his party a lodging of twenty days.

Camp Bloodstone had inns, barracks, casinos, taverns, and other facilities. There were also over ten slave camps and an arena that could accommodate an audience of hundreds of people. The arena was the prime entertainment at Camp Bloodstone, and Stormhammer's greatest source of wealth.

The ring was open when they arrived, so after dinner Richard brought everyone along to watch a match. Slaves and fighters of different backgrounds engaged in battle here, turning it into a place where those in power resolved their conflicts covertly. Richard was going so he could estimate the power of the fighters in Bloodstone.

For the price of two gold coins, he booked a compartment on the second level, surrounded by other similar viewing platforms. By the time he settled down in his seat, the entirety of the arena was almost full. Everyone in the crowd was standing, their bodies pressed against each other. The bustling noise almost threatened to tear the roof apart, but the murky atmosphere had reached its peak. Strangely enough, this mix of hormones, adrenaline, and blood in the air slowly and continuously strengthened the bloodlust in the crowd.

Clang! Clang! Two loud crashes echoed from the platform on Richard's left, capturing his attention. A short yet sturdy man had thrown his crutches on the railing of the platform, using his hands to maneuver his body as he threw himself into the wide and cozy chair and let out a breath of satisfaction. The crutches were solid and sturdy, seemingly made entirely out of steel. There was a row of burly guards behind the man, and they were clearly not weak at

all.

That man turned his head around and offered a brilliant smile to Richard before saying. “I am Bowen, but the people here all call me Bowen the Lame.”

“Richard. Richard Archeron.”

Bowen continued to beam and asked, “Ah, so it’s Mr. Richard. I wonder where you come from? If I am not mistaken, you should be a respected noble.”

Richard replied indifferently, “My family does have nobility, but I know my title is of no use in this land. I have no intention of using it to get anything either, my sword will get me what I want.”

“Well said!” Bowen praised and continued, “In this cursed red land, you can only use your fists and swords to fight for your say. Those nobles who arrive here thinking otherwise mostly end up as a target for robbers or foreign creatures. But your guards all look very powerful.”

“It’s not just the looks. This afternoon, they even tested their abilities out and cleared a few crazed dogs,” Richard corrected with a smile.

“Is that so, what a coincidence! I lost a few dogs myself!” Bowen responded with a laugh. A ferocious glint then flashed in his eyes, and he remarked meaningfully, “Could Mr. Richard give me an explanation for this coincidence?”

“Explanation?” Richard finally turned his head and looked straight into Bowen’s eyes, unfazed, “You sent a few crazed dogs to test my capability and power, and I hacked them to death. This should tell you enough that I’m more powerful than you, what’s there to explain about such a simple matter? Don’t tell me you’re really foolish enough to want to attack me. Try, and it won’t be as simple as your teeth being knocked out. The hyenas might not even have a chance to nibble at your bones.”

Bowen's expression darkened slightly before he burst into loud laughter, "Mr. Richard is not tactful at all! This isn't exactly the conduct of a respectable noble."

Richard retorted, "You're saying you still know the meaning of the word tactful after having lived so long in the Bloodstained Lands?"

Bowen stared blankly and pondered for a moment before nodding, "Looks like Mr. Richard will have a pleasant stay here, unlike me. Those poor fellows in the ghettos rely on me for a living. But I only lost a few dogs. I've heard that the Blood Scythe lost a few family pets? One of them was even taken away, I reckon he's already enraged by now. You're a foreigner, so you should be careful."

Richard nodded and replied indifferently, "If he's smart enough, he'll know what he should and shouldn't do."

"Mark never seemed wise," Bowen continued to probe.

Richard stretched a little and leaned further into the back of his chair. After he got into a comfortable position, he spoke slowly and deliberately, "They say fools die early."

Book 2, Chapter 62

Gamble

Right at that moment, a bell rang out from the arena. A loud host stepped out, an energetic dwarf with a fiery red beard. Behind him were two naked women, bodies smeared with glistening oil from head to toe making them look like gems dipped in dew. They paraded out in all sorts of poses to the tune of the dwarf's exaggerated yells.

At the same time, more than ten people started to make rounds through the ring, taking bets from the crowd. Young ladies of various ethnicities made way to their positions in the various compartments on the second level— outside of basic services like food and drink, they would provide some key services. When matches got to the most gory part, for example, a few guests grew so hysterical and animalistic that they pinned these girls down and took them on the spot.

The ring was an open arena with a diameter of about twenty metres. It was less than a metre deep, surrounded by low walls that were about half a metre high. However, this minimal protection was one of the attractions— there would be incidents of accidental gore in the places nearest to the ring during some very intense matches.

The compartments on the second level were already fully occupied. Bowen, Chiron, Mark, and Howie were all present in their compartments, Stormhammer the only one who was nowhere to be seen. Richard took the chance to observe the Blood Scythe a little longer.

The man was humongous, with muscles as sturdy as steel and a layer of thick black hair covering his chest. His shirt left the chest bare, as if to display a medal for show. It seemed like he was of barbarian, if not orcish, descent. Separated by a single

compartment, Mark was glowering at Richard from the start. Richard had only turned to him after his exchange with Bowen.

Unlike Mark, who looked so menacing he was on the verge of leaping forward to kill at any time, Richard was calm and collected. The corner of his gaze rested on this upcoming opponent, not letting any detail slip him by. Be it Mark's glares, roars, or obscene gestures, Richard simply continued to keep an eye on the Blood Scythe and do nothing else. The more elaborate the man's motions grew, the more details his numeric vision would grant him.

The Blood Scythe was eventually unable to withstand Richard's passive gaze. He cursed viciously under his breath, turning his own to the ring. As unrestrained and crazy as he was, he would not openly disturb order by getting into a fight with the outsider on the viewing platforms. That would be a display of defiance towards Stormhammer, the most powerful man in the camp. Of course it would be another matter altogether if the outsider was provoked first, but unfortunately that did not happen.

The matches had already begun, four human slaves being pit against a starving direbear. The battle quickly turned bloody as the bear clawed into the warrior's chest, slicing all the way down his body. A moment later, the wild beast had tackled the rest to the ground and was chewing them up to its heart's content right in front of the crowd.

Blood flowed, and organs shattered. The gore only hyped up the crowd, as the cheering intensified. The crowd was so pumped up that they could barely find a way to vent their adrenaline, and as they jostled against one another an unlucky fellow was pushed over the wall and into the ring by accident. This quickly got the attention of the bear, which pounced on him amidst screams of despair and took half his head off with a single swipe. The audience didn't so much as flinch, continuing to jostle as they were overcome by another clamorous cheer.

The battles continued, one after the other. After a few rounds, warriors with background began to take part in the battles, and two of the leaders even pitted their men against each other directly. From the matchups it seemed like Bowen and Chiron were at odds, while Howie had some urgent conflict with Stormhammer. Although the bloodstone orcs had lost, they left a deep impression with their strength.

On the other hand, Mark didn't seem to be on good terms with anyone.

When a dark-skinned man working under the Blood Scythe stepped into the ring, Richard called over the waitress and tossed a gold coin onto the tray in her hand. He gestured to the dark-skinned fighter, "I bet that he'll lose this round."

An outsider who'd directly entered the second level was already a focus of attention, but the radiance of the gold coin just intensified that. There wasn't even an opponent in the ring yet, but Richard had immediately bet on the man losing. It was clear that this was deliberately targeted at someone, and it caused an instant uproar within the ring as people began to engage in animated discussions.

Mark shot daggers at Richard with his eyes in response. However, he wasn't as chatty as before—he didn't say anything.

The battle ended very quickly, the dark-skinned warrior winning without much ado. Richard could already tell that he was a level 10 warrior gifted with innate strength, while his opponent was only level 8 without anything special whatsoever. The victory was actually a given.

Mark glared harshly at Richard, before letting out a smug roar. He then grabbed hold of a waitress and dragged her over, pinning her against the railing. Ripping her skirt off ruthlessly, he forcefully entered her body and began thrusting vigorously.

Richard smiled for a moment before calling his waitress over. He gestured towards the dark-skinned man once more, "I bet he'll lose

the next round.”

Ten gold coins leapt into the tray, and as they fell in they didn't just grab the crowd's attention this time. Mark's manhood was brought to a strangling halt, as he momentarily forgot what he was doing.

He snapped out of his reverie in an instant, however, and realised what was happening. The instant, tremendous humiliation drowned out his sense of reason, and he pushed the young lady away before pointing at Richard, “I want to bet against you! Do you dare have someone battle my Black Reaper? I'll bet just as much money as you!”

Richard gave a reserved smile. At this moment, his expression reflected his status as a true-blue aristocrat— a state of absolute grace coupled with a faint arrogance of leadership that was not displeasing to the eye, “What an excuse for guts! I thought you'd say you'll bet many times what I do, but it turns out it's only one to one.”

Mark's face reddened instantly, and turned purple the next moment. He had already tightened his grip around the short scythes that made him famous, and the arena quieted down at once.

Richard remained still in his seat, appearing completely unfazed by Mark's response. He took out a coin pouch with his dazzlingly fair, delicate hands, emptying its contents onto the tray to make a small mound.

“This should be enough for now, I wouldn't want this fellow to lose his pants to me. He seems like he hasn't washed them in the longest time,” he said lightly. His bright, clear voice travelled to every ear in the arena, causing countless pairs of eyes to look towards the lower part of Mark's body. The repeated setbacks had shrunk his manhood to its smallest size, so much so that it was pathetic to look at.

In the next moment, booming laughter drowned out everything else.

Book 2, Chapter 63

Gamble(2)

Richard turned to look at the people behind him, asking, “Who wants to go down and play?”

Waterflower, Gangdor, and the trolls had no intention of moving. This battle posed no real challenge for them, and the girl additionally didn’t like to put on performances. If anyone wanted to watch her perform, she would gouge out their eyes.

One of the footsoldiers took a step forward, saying in a low voice, “I’ll go.”

Richard nodded and said, “Don’t end it too quickly.”

The foot soldier immediately understood what Richard meant, and in a confident and cruel way stated, “Don’t worry, my Lord. I will ensure the battle goes on long enough!”

This was a battle without requirements or restrictions. Both sides could use their own weapons and armour. The Black Reaper chose two axes, while the much smaller soldier chose light armour, a small square shield, and a dagger. This immediately gave rise to hisses of displeasure from the audience. The ring preferred blood to the clash of metal, and warriors with such complete defensive equipment were rare.

Regardless of how the audience opposed this, the match officially began with the roars from the host. The Black Reaper pounced at the soldier from the start, his axes hacking down like a gale as he showered the man with successive strikes. The soldier was like a boat in a storm amidst his resounding roars, seemingly about to capsize at any moment. However, while he was constantly pushed back and seemed to be on the verge of reaching the end, he was always able to narrowly get through the attacks.

The storm of attacks had left the steel shield completely

deformed, and his armour had a couple of cracks as well. Unlike the Black Reaper's axes, the dagger was so small it looked like a toy. Thankfully the two weapons never clashed, so it was still intact.

However, his opponent had suffered quite a few injuries as well. The footsoldier had constantly managed to find the time to counterattack from the midst of his defence, using extremely tricky angles that left long, thin wounds on his target's body.

These tiny injuries did nothing to affect the Black Reaper's battle capabilities. On the contrary, they only made him more fierce. The powerful movements and heart shaking bellows would make anyone feel restless as they felt their blood pumping.

Even Mark, who'd already lifted his pants back up, had thrown himself at the railing, waving his arms with full strength as his roars resounded even louder than his fighter's own!

All he wished was for himself to be in the ring, using his heavy scythes to chop that footsoldier into pieces and throw them at Richard's face. Seeing the Black Reaper losing golden opportunities to thoroughly defeat his opponent time and time again, his anxiety peaked repeatedly.

Mark had already immersed himself in the battle, unable to see many details. It couldn't be helped, however— Richard had taken out a staggering 50 gold coins, and those were church coins at that! While he wouldn't have to lose his pants for this, it still was comparable to a few months of his income. Folks like him who'd only risen up in the past few years had pitifully meagre savings.

In the meanwhile, Chiron shifted to Bowen's side. Practically stretching his head over the viewing platform, he asked, "Hey old man, do you see anything with that Richard's subordinate?"

Bowen answered with another question, "What have you discerned?"

Chiron chuckled, knowing that this was the man's typical behaviour, "His movements are short and effective, not sloppy in the slightest. He's firm and radiant, and doesn't seem to feel anything at the sight of blood. That's completely different from our guys who go crazy with their bloodlust."

Bowen looked at the noble youth viewing the match with interest, saying slowly, "He's a true veteran. If he was in an army, he would have at least five hundred soldiers under him."

Chiron twitched his lips, looking in Richard's direction, "You can't judge a veteran's power from their rank. Take a look, it isn't just one fellow like that next to Mr. Richard."

Bowen looked to be deep in thought, "It seems like Mark will be in trouble soon."

Chiron nodded, "Whatever it is, this is good. However, this Mister Richard really doesn't know how to hide his wealth. Even I'm feeling something after seeing all those gold coins."

Bowen, however, sneered, "But what if his original intention was for you to feel something?"

Chiron's expression changed, and he silently thought it over for a while. He then glanced over, finding that many people's gazes were filled with fervour and greed as they watched Richard. However, the man himself seemed oblivious and merely watched the battle keenly.

The match had gone on for a whole ten minutes, and by now the Black Reaper was panting hard. His roars had dulled and he'd grown dispirited, and although his axes were still powerful his quivering muscles were proof that he was nearing his limits. He blocked fewer and fewer attacks, the dagger increasingly making contact with skin and leaving behind wound after wound on his body.

Mark suddenly stopped shouting, because even he had realised

something was off here. The Black Reaper was showing even more of his weaknesses, but the footsoldier still was as guarded as he had been at the beginning, finding opportunities to retaliate and keep leaving little wounds behind on his body. There were a few opportunities to send his dagger in to the hilt, but he gave them up and chose to pare off some skin. The Black Reaper already had tens of wounds on his body, and every one of them continued to bleed. He left behind bloodstained footprints with every step he took.

All of a sudden the footsoldier quickened the pace of his attacks, and the style kept changing. Each time the dagger attacked, a thin layer of flesh would be skinned off from his opponent, leaving the man howling in agony. The bloody footprints on the ground soon grew more pronounced, and a mist of blood dispersed in the air.

Such brutal tactics immediately gave rise to a new merriment in the match. By the time the footsoldier swept at the Black Reaper's throat to end his drawn out misery, the ring was burning with energy once more.

He then straightened his body, loudly striking his shield with the dagger before he turned to Richard, arms raised high to proclaim victory. There were a few injuries on him as well, and some were even long and deep, but none were fatal. They wouldn't even affect his abilities—receiving injuries properly was a basic yet important element of experience. The footsoldier's eyes were clear and direct, seemingly unperturbed by the cheers. The reason he had showed a victor's pose was actually merely to match with Richard's aim of suppressing Mark.

Just as the foot soldier accepted the cheers for the victor, he suddenly sensed a trace of danger. Richard's own expression rapidly changed, mouth opening and closing as if yelling something to him. An instinct borne of years in battle instantly surfaced, and he went low and covered his back with his shield.

A heavy force rammed into the shield, a short steel spear! The thing had so much force behind it that it made its way through the

metal, burying itself deep into the soldier's shoulder and re-emerging from his chest.

Book 2, Chapter 64

Gamble(3)

Richard immediately stood up, his face darkening. A warrior in leather armour was taking out a second spear in preparation to attack once more, but two rays of holy light flashed past the arena to fall on the soldier. One was a greater heal, while the other was a protective spell similar to a magical shield. Another ray of light shone on the man after the first two had passed, augmenting his long range defences, a spell cast by Tiramisu.

The entire arena was shocked by the three consecutive rays of light. All the high-ranked warriors knew exactly what that meant — Richard had a mage and someone of faith under him! And looking at the negligible timespan between the two holy spells, it had to be a priest at minimum!

Even at level 12, priests in Faelor had great position in society, and in battle they were even more useful than the level 14 Stormhammer. As for a mage of the same level? Their status would surpass even the priest's!

The assailant was intimidated, blanking out for a moment. It was only then that he remembered that his previous blow had not been fatal, and with the greater heal that had just come in the enemy's combat abilities would not be affected if they recuperated well. He raised his arm in preparation once more, but the slight hesitation had forever lost him the chance. A sharp whistle rang through the arena as Gangdor's axe whistled through the air. A numbing rip sounded as it crashed into the man, instantly cutting him diagonally in two. Three spectators within range of the axe were killed as well, before it finally dug deep into one of the rock platforms. Even after the axe stopped, the handle was still buzzing.

Richard suddenly turned his head to look at Bowen, asking, "Whose?"

Bowen had wanted to delay as per usual practice, but seeing Richard's charming smile he nearly jumped out of his chair, as if he'd been drenched by cold water.

"Mark's!" he answered as fast as he could.

Richard nodded, and a fireball instantly shot towards Mark's compartment. All of a sudden, the entire arena fell into chaos!

"It's another mage!"

"Oh no, run! It's a fireball!"

Fireballs were much more effective in enclosed spaces, and although they weren't much of a threat to high-ranking warriors they were fatal to commoners. Mark's face distorted under the onslaught of flames, and surging fire soon engulfed the Blood Scythe and filled every bit of space in the room, even overflowing back outside. A painful groan sounded from within, and the wall at the back exploded to reveal a path outside. Half of the platform crumbled from the wall, crashing into the chaotic crowd below.

Richard snorted, sitting down slowly, "That escape was quick."

Gangdor had already brought two knights to charge into the arena, carrying their wounded comrade back to Richard's room where treatment immediately began. None of the guards dared interfere with his actions—the two mages and priest were more than sufficient intimidation.

The ground level had become a mess, with people pushing one another in a fight to rush to the exit. On the other hand, the second level was very quiet. Outside of Mark's men who had all fled, Howie, Chiron, and Bowen remained calmly in their seats with their gazes fixed on Richard. However, even they had some uneasiness and fear on their faces. Richard hadn't even displayed his full power, but it already put heavy pressure on them.

Richard took out a white handkerchief and began wiping his hands, seemingly to wipe away the ashes from the fireball.

However, the magical flames of the spell left no ash behind at all. The expressions of the three leaders changed slightly after seeing Richard's actions.

This was in fact a strategy Flowsand had taught Richard, using iconic actions to greatly intensify the other party's impressions of him and conveying his emotions through physical cues.

Richard spoke indifferently as he was cleaning his hands, "You're smart, Mr. Bowen, and I like smart people. Maybe we can work together on some matters in the future."

"I look forward to it!" Bowen replied.

By this time, the dwarf managing the arena had rushed into Richard's room, raising his voice as he exclaimed, "You've blown up the are—"

However, his words remained unfinished as he was cut off by the ten coins Richard threw over. He frantically picked up all the coins, rubbing his eyes hard and counting them repeatedly. He then spoke cautiously, "Two of my guards died as well, Sir. They were elites, amongst the bravest, most loyal, and most handsome warriors of the bloodstone tribe..."

Richard threw over another twenty gold coins and asked nonchalantly, "Is this enough?"

"Enough, it's enough! That's too much!" the dwarf said, picking it all up frantically.

Richard's chair turned around and he faced the dwarf, "Really? That's good. Alright now, my warriors faced a sneak attack by Mark's man in your arena. How are you going to account for this?"

The dwarf was startled, and his eyes quickly turned a few times. He finally smiled in response, "You see, many people died in this arena because of you. I suggest you just let it go."

Richard's gaze remained level as he said indifferently, "Let it go? Are you saying that my elite warriors are the same as these useless

guards with no power? I don't think that's how the bloodstone tribe sees it. Is it a rule of your arena to allow the defeated to ambush the victors as they wish? Is that the reputation of the half-orcs?"

The dwarf was surprised, not expecting Richard to be so well-versed in the laws of the camp. The last sentence had been quite profound, and his smile grew even more flattering, "You are wise, my Lord. Of course those ordinary people cannot compensate for your loss, but you will obtain the goodwill of the bloodstone tribe. I believe that is far more important than a few gold coins. As for those despicable scum, they should be condemned and punished!"

Seeing the knight's wound taken care of, Richard stood up, "Punishment... Very well, I believe in the goodwill of the bloodstone tribe. Let's go!"

After waiting for Richard to make it far away, Bowen, Chiron, and Howie all left after exchanging glances that seemed to speak volumes.

Once he was back at the inn where he lived, Richard immediately changed into clothes that would allow for swift movement. He then issued a quick series of orders, and moments later dozens of warhorses galloped out of the inn and into the darkness. On both sides were wind wolves running at a similar speed as well. Although they'd exhausted their wind blades at the battle at the blockade, Flowsand's Vigour spell combined with half a day of rest had given them the energy to use the ability once more.

The person at the front of the cavalry, right beside Richard himself, was actually Sam. His hand was pointed ahead, towards the location of Mark's lair.

Book 2, Chapter 65

Vengeance

The Blood Scythe and his forces occupied the entire block, along with the surrounding areas. The most important part, the spring's mouth, sat right in his courtyard. Besides the taverns nearby, Mark's only income was through a single casino. However, despite it being prime time there were barely any people here.

Richard mulled over it for a moment, concluding that this definitely wasn't due to the incident at the arena earlier in the evening. News of that definitely wouldn't have spread so quickly. It seemed like the business wasn't going well for some time, which should be why he'd sent Sam to collect a toll outside Camp Bloodstone. With Mark's personality and the way he handled affairs, it would be a surprise for him to ever improve the casino's profits.

Bloodstone wasn't considered particularly big— it took but a few minutes at full gallop for Richard's army to reach Mark's base, and although the advancing soldiers alarmed nearly half the camp the attack was so sudden that the half-orcs were barely alerted before Richard and his troops were long gone.

At the entrance to Mark's base, everyone was just dismounting as the trolls made it over as well. Medium Rare sped up with a wave of Richard's hand, throwing himself towards the entrance with a bellow. He leapt up as he was about to make contact, ruthlessly smashing his hammer into the gates. A loud rumble sounded out as they gave way, detaching from the frame before flying out into the yard. Smoke and dust rose from the ground.

As he stood before the main entrance, the remnant page of the Book of Holding appeared in Richard's hand. Five direwolves charged up in the next moment, brutally attacking anything in sight that was moving. Cries and screams of alarm filled the air,

turning the entire courtyard into a mess.

The sentries along the wall had been dozing off. The attack was so quick that it was only now that they realised something was amiss. However, two arrows screeched through the darkness and buried into their throats, stopping them from shouting out. Richard calmly stood at the gates and cast Nature's Beckon, spawning five more wolves that caused even more chaos.

As the pack of ten wolves pounced around in the yard, Richard started to chant the spell for the all-too-familiar fireballs. However, several of his men started to look at him with peculiar expressions.

Magic affected everyone in a melee, including the allies of the caster. However, Richard's tactic allowed him to cast without restraint. This was not the first time this had happened—an array of delayed fireballs engulfing even his own summons. It was likely that someone unfamiliar with him would suffer disastrous damage if they charged forth, but the reward was as great as the risk.

The target of the fireballs this time was the second floor of Mark's residence. Three fireballs all landed around the same area, detonating at the same time and turning the Blood Scythe's cries of surprise into calls for help. Waves of fire engulfed the entire courtyard in a flash, even as tongues of flames spewed out of the windows.

As well-built as Sam was, he trembled as he stared at the scene before him. It wasn't long before his quivering legs gave way, leaving him to land on his bum.

Richard pointed into the courtyard once the fire died down, and his men threw themselves inside ruthlessly, starting a massacre. Dozens of wind wolves circled out back, leaping over the walls to attack the enemies from behind.

A few minutes later, the battle cries slowly started to fade. Mark's tall, sturdy silhouette appeared in the courtyard, staring at

Richard who was by the gates. Beams of hateful rage shot out of his eyes, and with a scythe in each hand he rushed towards Richard after roaring wildly.

The Blood Scythe staggered with every step he took, his clothes already soaked crimson. Yellow light flashed over him before he could take more than two, a spell from Tiramisu that slowed him to a third of his original pace. Dozens of weapons then stabbed into his body, the Shepherd of Eternal Rest plunging into his back.

Right before he drew his last breath, however, Mark roared and took a few more strides to everyone's surprise. However, a sacred flame descended upon him from the sky, and he immediately screamed in agony. He staggered aimlessly a few more steps, before collapsing head first into the ground. The weight of his body caused him to slide forward quite a bit, stopping right at Richard's feet.

A snow-white handkerchief slowly floated down onto Mark's head, and immediately after Richard stepped down as he grinded his feet on his fallen foe's skull.

Flowsand happened to walk out of the yard at that moment, witnessing the scene. She whispered into Richard's ear, assuring him, "There's no enemies around you now, you don't have to do this..."

Richard stopped what he was doing, and without even batting an eyelid quietly reached out and pinched her buttcheeks with all his strength.

However, Flowsand didn't cry out as she spoke calmly, "These are all our men. You don't need to do this either..."

This started to stifle Richard's breathing once more, even though he'd just gone back to normal a while ago.

The battle was long over, but the raging fires continued to engulf Mark's two-storey residence. Olar lugged a huge chest out from

amidst the blaze, also carrying about a dozen sacks of all sizes on his person. The elf was extremely sensitive to the scent of wealth. Even the hidden stores of experienced nobles could not escape him, let alone the Blood Scythe who had naught but muscles in his brain.

He walked over to Richard's side, handing him the chest before kicking Mark, "This fellow is a pauper! He doesn't have more than 300 coins!"

Richard turned to Gangdor, "How many survivors?"

Shrugging, Gangdor replied, "Most of the survivors are amongst those who ran at first chance. There's only dead and crippled people in the courtyard, and they couldn't run if they wanted to. Forget about captives, boss."

Richard realised the hidden meaning behind Gangdor's words, finding that there had been a problem with himself. Since he was already at the Bloodstained Lands, there was no need for him to capture enemies and turn them into his soldiers. Gold and slaves would work much better.

Richard agreed with a nod, pointing at Mark's body, "Alright. Bring him along, We're heading back!"

Everyone mounted, and Mark's body was thrown on the back of a horse as well. They made their way back to the inn without a hurry, noticing a wave of heavy and chaotic footsteps in the distance. Half-orc soldiers came out of the corner, stopping Richard in his tracks. These were warriors of Bloodstone, the core force maintaining order in the camp.

They'd actually made it quite quickly, but all they could do was stand in Richard's path. He'd already finished what he'd set out to do. Before Mark could treat his wounds after escaping to his base, Richard had already taken his troops out to kill him. Of course, this wouldn't have been possible without Sam's help, since he knew Mark inside out. Without the fellow leading the way,

Richard's troops would not have acted so quickly, and it would have required more effort to win the battle.

Book 2, Chapter 66

Vengeance(2)

Richard reined in his horse, sizing up the half-orc warriors standing in his way. The longer he took to observe, the more information he would receive about his target.

There were a total of eight bloodstone orcs stopping Richard, each about two metres tall with the levels between 6 and 8. However, with their innate strength they were similar to warriors a level higher in combat. However, 6 to 8 and 7 to 9 weren't much different to Richard's group. There were two mages in their party, and orcs had pitiful resistance to magic.

The leader took two steps forward, pointing at Richard's nose, "Human! You've killed at Camp Bloodstone, and Chief Stormhammer doesn't like trouble. You're to come with me now, if he is free he will interrogate you tomorrow."

"Orc! Dare point at a mage that way again, and your arm will instantly be severed," Richard answered apathetically.

A few orcs immediately showed looks of terror, and some even retreated. Mages were terrifying to orcs, their existence second only to the evil dragons. However, the leader roared in fury, "Are you threatening the brave warriors of Camp Bloodstone?"

But even if his snarls were fierce, the hand he'd used to point at Richard lowered. Mages were evil and terrifying to orcs, and the legends had made them out to be omnipotent. They could render the most powerful warriors impotent forever, a punishment more frightening than death itself.

"Threatening a mage will result in far worse outcomes," Richard said with a hint of laughter.

However, the half-orc warrior didn't seem to think the same way. However, he hummed and finally conceded, "You burnt

Mark's residence. You should at least let us know what happened, no?"

Richard waved his hand, and a footsoldier lifted the corpse's head to show the orcish warriors its face.

"It's the Blood Scythe!" one of them cried in alarm.

The violent and powerful fellow was notorious in Camp Bloodstone, but now he'd fallen into the hands of this young and handsome mage. It was unknown whether he was even alive! Mages were truly terrifying aberrations.

Richard spoke leisurely, "This fellow lost a gamble to me at the arena, but he wasn't willing to pay up. I had no choice but to collect on the debt myself. His life can be considered the interest he owes me."

"This..." The half-orc scratched his head, at a loss for answers. From the standpoint of maintaining order, it did indeed make sense to enforce debts. Such disputes occurred everyday in Bloodstone, and every once in a while some lives were lost. The problem here was that Richard had created a big mess, and from the looks of it he'd killed off the Blood Scythe's family as well.

Just as they were at a standstill, a short, stocky figure hastened over from the distance, calling out from his location, "Sir Richard, Lord Richard! Wait, I have something to say!"

This was the dwarven host of the gladiatorial ring. He ran till he was gasping for breath, but even ten or so metres away he couldn't wait as he spoke out, "Mark isn't someone to be trifled with! Sir Richard, please do not be too rash... Ah!"

The dwarf was stunned; he had seen Mark's corpse. His gaze seemed to stay on Mark's face for an entire minute, and only then did he gulp, turning to look at Richard. At that moment, the charming face seemed no different from that of a devil.

Richard looked down at the dwarf, "These brave warriors of

Bloodstone do not want me to return. I remember you promised me some goodwill as the price for not pursuing your poor management of the arena.”

“But of course!” the dwarf quickly replied, darting over to the leader and saying something. It seemed like the dwarf was regarded highly by the bloodstone orcs, as his explanation was accepted without objection. The captain led his small team of warriors and left.

Richard shook his head slightly. So the orcs just left like that? It seemed like this dwarf had quite the status, and Mark wasn’t all that liked either. However, he had only used a small portion of his mana, and the might of most of his subordinates had not been displayed. He’d wished for the warriors to be more forceful, so he could test the abilities of the bloodstone orcs. However, since they were smart enough not to provoke him he would not indulge in competition.

Richard then chuckled aloud, guiding his horse ahead till they reached the inn safely. Numerous pairs of eyes spied on them from the shadows along the way, but seeing Mark’s corpse none dared make a move.

Returning to the inn, Richard patted Sam on the shoulder, “Well done!”

Ever since he’d come to Faelor, he’d found himself liking people like Yomen and Sam more and more. They could do many things, and were of great use as guides.

He then had people hoist the Blood Scythe’s corpse up, bringing it to the room Zendrall currently resided in.

Zendrall had stuck to his position as a prisoner along the way, not stirring any trouble. Their interactions during this time told Richard that this necromancer was someone who valued trust and promises, arrogant but stubbornly persistent in mage tradition. Since he’d defeated the man properly in a magic duel, Richard had

gained his respect.

The power of the Book of Holding was still viewed as a part of Richard's own power on Faelor. Here, the use of magic equipment was alright in a duel. There were few mages in this plane, all of them of high position, and they monopolised the production of any powerful magic equipment. Thus, they showed off the importance of such items in duels, and the more powerful the equipment a mage could use the more respect they garnered.

After all, one still needed mana to activate such equipments, and acolytes skipping levels to use powerful items was impossible. Thus, the art of magic battle involved a perfect combination of both mage and equipment.

In other words, the five direwolves Richard had summoned had given Zendrall less of a shock than the single page from the Book of Holding.

Entering Zendrall's room, Richard had the corpse placed on the floor as he smiled, "Zendrall, I've found you some fairly good material."

Zendrall's eyes flashed and he crouched by Mark's side. He took a careful look and then sighed in praise, "This is a very sturdy warrior. His body and bones weren't damaged much, and if processed well he can become the perfect dark knight. He might even grow more powerful than he was when he was alive!"

However, the fire in his eyes immediately died out, "It's a pity that I'm only a prisoner."

"If you are willing, you don't have to be one," Richard stated.

Book 2, Chapter 67

The Path Of A Mage

“You want me to capitulate?” Zendrall asked seriously.

Richard shook his head in answer, “Mage tradition ensures that your life has belonged to me ever since you lost the duel of life and death.”

Seeing Zendrall look like he had something to say, Richard preempted him with a wave of his arm, “I know, you can give up on your life whenever. But before that, I want you to think this through seriously. Is there any meaning in that? Are you willing to give up on the most mighty dream of mages, give up on exploring the boundless mysteries of magic, give up on possibly making contact with the gods themselves? What about leaving Faelor and exploring the boundless planes? Those are things mages take pride in, goals they persevere towards!”

The necromancer was completely taken by Richard’s words. He hadn’t ever heard or considered what the young noble in front of him had just mentioned, but once he thought it through he realised that this was the attitude all mages had to have. Touching upon the mysteries of the gods themselves? Even as a necromancer, he didn’t have the guts to dare attempt it. And then, Richard had given him another prospect to think about, exploring the myriad planes. He’d never thought such a thing would be possible, but coming from Richard’s mouth all this seemed like a given. It definitely wasn’t something the youth made up!

At that moment, Richard was an imposing mountain in Zendrall’s mind, one which he could gaze upon but whose peak he would never find.

Richard’s words had been simple, but the things he had spoken of were quite significant for the future of a mage. These were paths that could be walked very far in the future. Indeed, it was so far off

that this mere level 9 could not have found out on his own. It showed that his inheritance and knowledge with respect to magic far surpassed the peak of what he himself had learnt from Faelor.

Of course, that was a given. Even in Norland the magic inheritance of the Deepblue was of the highest calibre. The knowledge of anyone from the Deepblue's streets would likely surpass that of Faelor greatly.

"You... Do you speak the truth?" Zendrall's voice trembled as he asked a question he himself knew to be foolish.

"What do you think?" Richard asked back with a smile.

Zendrall had grown so emotional his face was completely red, but a moment later he sat down with disappointment, hugging his head, "But... I am a necromancer."

Richard understood where that dejection came from, "If I did not consider you a true mage, I wouldn't have agreed to the duel. Nor would I have used a divine tool like the page from the Book of Holding from the beginning."

Zendrall was stunned by these words. He looked up at Richard before slowly standing up as he finally made up his mind. "What do you need me to do?"

Richard muttered to himself for a while before speaking up, "I search for supreme strength, the sort of power that surpasses the limits of this world. I need you to give your all for its sake, carrying out my every order as I make it without question. I believe all your doubts and questions will be answered, but you will perhaps continue to discover more unknowns. I can release you from the confinements of this plane, I can allow you to explore what is beyond! There is still a long path ahead that even I know nothing of, and the search will be very long. However, is it not this very charm that is worthy of our very lives in an effort to investigate the mysteries of magic?"

The necromancer's eyes continued to brighten with Richard's every word, as if a blueprint of the massive and magnificent world of magic had been laid before him. He looked at Richard, done speaking and merely watching him with a smile, and composed himself, "There is one more thing I need to remind you of, my Lord. I am a necromancer, and in the eyes of the gods we are heretics that must be burnt at the stake. We work with the souls of the dead, and that is a domain no god will allow to be violated. If I join your party, you might end up wanted by many of the large churches."

Richard burst into laughter, "Don't worry! I have the guts to cooperate with demons, so what do necromancers matter? I've never planned to cooperate with the gods of this plane, and I'm not afraid of their pursuit."

Zendrall nodded sternly, kneeling halfway. "In that case, I am willing to follow by your side as you seek supreme strength. You have my loyalty, my magic, and an army of undead."

He then followed up with a magic oath, one of the most restrictive at his level. While these weren't nearly as powerful as slave contracts, going against that oath would lead to a permanent drop of a level. Thus, the higher level the mage was, the more restrictive this oath would be.

Richard smiled slightly, "Then this corpse is yours. I hope a powerful warrior of darkness will join your army in the future."

"You shall not be disappointed," Zendrall answered.

"Good. Do give me a list of any magic materials you need for your research. My subordinates still have a batch of many materials." Having said this, Richard left Zendrall's room and let the anxious necromancer begin working on resurrecting a warrior of darkness.

Once he was out of the room, Richard saw Flowsand waiting with half a smile on her face. He beckoned to her, and she followed him up to the second floor and entered his room.

She only spoke after closing the door, “It’s such a pity that you aren’t a priest. Whether or not you really have faith, your ability to muster up followers is enough to make you great at the job.”

Richard pulled her into his embrace and gritted out, “If you dare tease me further, I’ll rape you!”

“That’s impossible.” Her slightly hoarse voice was enticing as always.

Richard’s eyebrows shot up, “You think I don’t have the guts to do that?”

Her upper body leant backwards slightly in response, showing off her perfect breasts, “It’s obviously not that. I’ll be doing my best to cooperate with you, so how would you call that rape?”

“You...” Richard was so frustrated in that moment that he was left tongue-tied.

Flowsand grinned, looking up to plant a light kiss on his lips, “There’s actually no need to wait for the day before we return. If one day you’re truly certain you can bring us back, that’s fine as well. At that point... I’ll do my best to resist!”

The raging inferno within Richard’s body was ignited again with her words. The arm fastened around her grew more tight as he asked, “So what about before I have this absolute confidence then?”

“I just told you,” came the reply, “I’ll do my best to cooperate.”

Book 2, Chapter 68

Inspiration

Richard's smile faded as he shook his head, letting go of the priestess. He moved over to his table, attentively examining a piece of hide placed upon it. This hide had a complete magic formation etched into it.

"Oh? Getting ready for work?" Flowsand did not seem to let Richard go.

Richard brushed the hide lightly with his left hand. The sensitive touch of his fingers could reveal even the smallest flaws on this rune. This would be its final inspection.

"Mm. This is the rune I prepared for Gangdor, an elementary strength rune. Even if it's only grade 1, it's quite suited to him. It'll complement his gaia bloodline quite well, giving his enemies a big surprise in battle."

"This doesn't seem to be a normal elementary strength," Flowsand said suddenly.

Richard was slightly surprised, but at this point he was already used to her vast knowledge. He explained, "There's some variation to the structure of this rune. It only activates when needed, and the amplification goes up to 50% instead of the standard 30. The disadvantage is that stimulating this requires strong intent, and it consumes energy at twice the normal rate. Even with Gangdor's stamina, he can only sustain five minutes in this berserk state. However, when fused with Gaia's Force the instantaneous boost in battle will be heavy. Even enemies who were originally equal to him will fall at his hands in that period."

"That sounds similar to your bloodline ability."

Richard nodded, "Yes, it was inspired by Eruption. However, my bloodline shouldn't be limited to that, and even Eruption itself

continued to grow stronger as I grow.”

“This rune...” Flowsand touched this hide like it was a work of art. She seemed to think of something, looking more and more surprised, “I’ve never heard of a rune like this that can boost one’s natural abilities. Richard... You’ve created something amazing!”

“Isn’t that a little bit of an exaggeration?” Richard asked with a smile, “This isn’t all that much better than an elementary strength rune, but the energy consumption is substantially higher. The passive boost to strength has become active and triggered, but there isn’t too much significance to that.”

“No, it’s not that simple,” Flowsand shook her head, “What if you consider this rune an ability? There’s almost no difference from Eruption, outside of the degree of amplification. How many people in the myriad planes have bloodline abilities? It pales in comparison to the number of people who can bear runes. Runes that can simulate bloodline abilities are considered to be grade 3 at minimum, but you’ve used a grade 1 rune to accomplish the same! Have you thought of using a similar method to simulate other grade 3 runes? If you can achieve that...”

Richard was shaken by those words. Flowsand had opened an unprecedented path before him, and all the grade 3 runes instantly flowed through his mind. His strong foundation from five years of study at the Deepblue was put to use, as he solved many problems one after the other. He discovered he could simulate more than half the grade 3 runes he knew with grade 1’s, if he could give up enough efficiency. Even some grade 4 runes weren’t impossible to simulate!

And at that moment, another vague idea passed through his mind like lightning. He seemed to grab hold of something important, but it also seemed like nothing at all.

“Richard...” Flowsand called out, but he immediately quieted her with a wave of his hand. He was staring out the window, but his

gaze was fixed on nothing. His brain worked at great speed, trying hard to capture the inspiration he'd just gotten a flash of. However, this information was so complex to handle that even with his blessing of wisdom he started experiencing a severe headache.

But even as the splitting headache seemed to take over, he suddenly understood!

Why were standard runes even designed? Most runemasters started off by creating standard runes, using them as a basis to design rune sets according to the physical requirements and restrictions of the user. Standard runes existed because these were old, matured designs that had undergone hundreds and even thousands of years of improvement. A considerable level of balance between stability, performance, capacity, and usage had been found, and they thus became a foundation for the mass production of rune knights.

However, it was impossible for standard runes to completely suit everyone's requirements, and powerful high-levelled people wouldn't be able to exhibit their full powers with standard runes. Thus, true runemasters customised rune sets based on the user's characteristics.

Runecrafting was a mixture of both art and science. Standard runes were utilitarian, scientific, while custom-designed runes were an expression of art. The grade of a runemaster also depended on their artistic ability.

It was only then that Richard understood why so many art subjects had been added into his course at the Deepblue. Rigorous and open artistic training had ended up showing him a new path—no, a brand new world!

Art has soul. A rune set could consist of one rune or quite a few, but regardless of that count the entire set had to become one with the person that used it. They needed to make a complete package,

with the same theme and the same soul!

Richard quickly raised his head to look at Flowsand, “Thank you!”

Flowsand looked seriously into Richard’s eyes, a smile slowly forming on her face. It wasn’t a slight grin like normal, but a full, brilliant and beautiful beam. It was only then that Richard realised how charming this priestess was when she was smiling merrily. The current Flowsand was gorgeous beyond recognition.

“You should,” she tapped lightly on his chest with her fingertips, “You’re quite gifted, with many valuable qualities, but your character is such a problem. You’re introverted, persistent but proud. Sadly, you’re extremely sensitive and fragile. At times you even seem like a poet, always hiding yourself as you drown in depression and grief, as if everything from the myriad planes has hurt you.”

Richard blushed and exclaimed angrily, “Flowsand!”

Flowsand stuck out her tongue and said quickly, “Alright, alright, I won’t say anymore. Actually, you always lack confidence!”

Richard quickly pinched her face and laughed, “But I seem to have confidence now. So thank you, for giving me most of that confidence!”

Flowsand snorted, straightening up, “Of course! Conquering women is the fastest way for a man to gain confidence. And whoever conquers me will have a lot...”

Book 2, Chapter 69

Favour

Richard held up the hide once more to closely examine it, before carefully placing it back on the ground. “I have an idea, but I need a bit more inspiration to come up with a rune that I can call my own. This rune has many memories that make it worth keeping, but I’ll just give it to Gangdor.”

“Alright. Also, what next now that Mark was destroyed?” Flowsand asked, “Are we taking control of his lands or do we have a discussion with the rest of the powers here?”

“There’s no hurry, let’s just wait. Stormhammer will look for us,” Richard carefully tucked the rune away as he set up the tools to build a slot.

“Why Stormhammer? Why not someone else?” Flowsand was relentless.

“Because he’s the boss.” Richard wasn’t distracted by the conversation, continuing to use both hands precisely and smoothly as he built the slot.

“Are you going to talk about an alliance?”

“It isn’t necessarily an alliance. We might just strike a compromise, or merely sound each other out. We’re foreigners; if we want to carve some space out for ourselves we need to observe what the bloodstone leader is like.”

“Why not just wipe out the bloodstone orcs and take the camp for ourselves?” Flowsand made a murderous suggestion.

Richard broke out into uncontrollable laughter, hitting her once on the head as he said, “Why would we want to take over such a lousy space? For those few springs? Stormhammer is a level 14 warrior with more than a hundred level 7 or 8 half-orc soldiers under him. If he had the right equipment or a bloodline ability,

even with a sneak attack we'll lose more than half our troops. Who do you suggest should die first?"

"Me." Flowsand's words always made him both love and hate her.

Richard clenched his teeth and grabbed hold of her collar, but on her end she actually propped up her chest and seized the opportunity to wiggle her waist, loosening her robes. It seemed like she had spoken the truth— before they were sure about their return, she would fully cooperate. However, her actions were too much for Richard to take. Was it a sort of rebellion?

When that thought came to mind, he could barely control himself. It took a while for him to return to normal, chasing the priestess out before going back to the work he had on hand. Gangdor was large and strong, so the slots themselves didn't need much work. Roughly two hours later, he'd finally finished it.

At that moment, Olar walked into Richard's room. The news he bore wasn't surprising, but it came faster than he had expected. Bloodstone orcs had come to their inn, inviting Richard to lunch the next noon with Stormhammer himself.

"It was quite the etiquette for a bunch of half-orcs!" The elven poet did not forget to add his own derision after the report, looking down on the creatures who tried to act noble but never even cleaned themselves.

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The meeting with the most powerful leader of Camp Bloodstone was held at the central castle. Unlike the rest of the bloodstone orcs, Stormhammer looked more human than orc. He was roughly half a head shorter than the average warrior of his tribe, but one could see his muscles were dense and hard as iron. His head was almost bald outside of three black and white pigtails, and from outward appearances he seemed to look like someone who was over fifty years of age.

However, this was only due to the tough conditions in the Bloodstained Lands making its residents look older than they actually were. It wouldn't be too much of a stretch for Stormhammer to only be in his early forties.

The two seemed like real nobles having lunch, both seated at opposite ends of a long table. However, this was where the similarities came to an end. The table only had barbecued meat and strong alcohol on it. This was considered a feast in the Bloodstained Lands, but even a titled knight from the human kingdoms could host a banquet that was infinitely grander.

Still, Richard maintained impeccable manners that wouldn't lose out in the parties of the most prestigious nobles. Most unbelievably he looked calm and joyful, completely unbothered by the fact that the plate was chipped, the table had holes in it, and even the wineglass hadn't been washed clean. He completely immersed himself into the act, as though this was a real grand banquet.

Yet, the entire demeanour was a facade. He was already watching the half-orc on the other end of the table through his peripheral vision, bracing himself for whatever may happen. Stormhammer had been radiating a strong sense of danger from the start— if he ignored his own safety to launch an attack on Richard, his knights would not have the time to save him.

It took until they were halfway done for the man to finally ask, “Mr. Richard... You're a mage yourself, but you also have another mage in your party?”

“That is right,” Richard nodded in acknowledgement.

The half-orc's face stirred with emotion, but he quickly suppressed it to continue his questions, “I hear that great mages are skilled at manufacturing magic artifacts?”

“I'm no great mage,” Richard said with a smile, “But I'm almost at that level. As for your question, the world of magic is very vast, and no mage is skilled enough to understand all forms of magic

well. If you wish for magic accessories, that is the job of alchemists. If you want something you already have enhanced, that falls under the purview of an enchanter. Even roughly, there are more than ten main divisions of magic.”

Stormhammer was startled, not expecting there to be so many different and complicated fields of magic. The half-orcs did not have any traditional inheritance in the field, and what little knowledge they did have came from passing visitors. He had been under the impression that any mage could manufacture magical equipment.

He paused for a while to look at the graceful smile of the young mage seated across him, deciding to get to the point, “I am 41 years of age this year, and growing my power through exercise has become a difficult task. I need a magic item, whatever it may be, to put me on par with a level 15 warrior. Is there a way you can help me with this?”

Richard muttered to himself for a while before speaking up, “It isn’t implausible, but such a thing would need a lot of materials. In addition to that, it might require a lot of time—“ he paused at that moment to notice that Stormhammer had waved the need for materials away. It would not be a problem. “Also, I would like to know what aspect of your abilities you need to enhance. This is crucial, it will allow me to tailor the item to your requirements.”

The moment Richard brought up his need for resources, Stormhammer’s eyes had lit up with unconcealable glee. In the Bloodstained Lands, a high stakes proposal signified the possibility of a successful partnership. He wasn’t worried at all about being cheated—the mages of this world had an excellent reputation. Any powerful mage treated promises and trust more seriously than their own lives. Moreover, he himself had an absolute advantage in strength, which would make for the cornerstone of a successful partnership.

Book 2, Chapter 70

Favour(2)

Seeing that his wish of many years might come true, even the powerful Stormhammer could barely contain himself. Hearing Richard's conditions, he immediately explained, "In the stone forest west of Camp Bloodstone is a powerful beast called the Fleeting Shadow. It is a mutated demonic wolf, possessing power so great that my two strongest sons died at its hand one after the other. Even with my strength, I can only match up to it, unable to kill it at all. I need the power to exterminate it! I am in my prime now, but in a few years my strength will begin to decline. If I don't kill it now, I never will!"

Pointing to the half-orc warriors on either side of the man, Richard asked, "You have so many warriors here. Why don't you take an army with you?"

Stormhammer sighed in reply, "The Fleeting Shadow is extremely cunning, as smart as any human. It will accept my lone challenge, but if I bring our warriors it goes into hiding. Even the most experienced adventurers who are adept at tracking cannot find it.

"Besides, the terrain of the stone forest is extremely helpful to its combat style. It appears when you least expect it to, launching a surprise attack. None of my elite warriors can withstand a single full power blow from it, so be it our own operations or with outsider help, no one can get rid of it. It simply treats the place like its property, coming to the camp to hunt in winter or during droughts."

Richard was taken aback by this. The elites of Camp Bloodstone were warriors on par with his own troops, reaching level 10. Of course it was another matter altogether in actual combat, Norland's inheritance of training and strategy making them two

levels higher than those from secondary planes. Richard's team knew how to complement each other, all of them professionals with valiance and extraordinary might. They could take on two bloodstone orcs of the same level and emerge victorious. However, both parties weren't much different in terms of body strength. If the Fleeting Shadow could take out an elite warrior of Camp Bloodstone in one blow, the same would hold with his own men.

He paused in thought for a moment before speaking up, "If it is just to raise your power to make you on par with a level 15 warrior, and it only needs to be activated in combat, I might be able to help."

Stormhammer's eyes lit up, "Even if it's temporary, I want it! As long as it can last ten— no, just five minutes will do! What do you need, Mr. Richard? Not just the materials you need, I can give you anything! This deal... What do you need from me?!"

Richard leaned back into his chair, looking very relaxed, "I need a lot of things. Large numbers of warriors, slaves, horses, and basic equipment. I also need magical materials, rare minerals, and other exclusive materials from the barbarian ancestral spirit plains. I also need a map of the Bloodstained Lands that details the distribution of power, the more detailed the better. This is all I came to the Bloodstained Lands for, how much of it can you offer for this deal?"

Stormhammer thought it over for a moment before declaring, "We have some magical materials, and ore as well. They were left untouched because none of us knew how to use them, so you can take your pick. As for warriors, I can lend you twenty powerful ones. I only have a detailed map of the areas around Bloodstone, with the map of more remote places not as accurate. But before all that, might I know how you plan to raise my power? Is it a set of magical armour, or a formidable scroll?"

"I do not have a set of armour with me, nor do I have an enchanter. As for scrolls, one that can raise your power by an

entire level has to be at least at the sixth grade, something I likewise do not have. Even if I did, you would not be able to use it. It is none of the above.

“In fact, I have an even better option for you. Gangdor!” Richard gestured to the brute.

Gangdor took a few steps forward, arriving beside the table, “What can I do, boss?”

“Test your strength with the respected Stormhammer over there. While you’re at it, give your new rune a try as well,” Richard instructed, subtly shooting a meaningful glance at the man.

Gangdor nodded, ripping his shirt apart to reveal the magical patterns on his right chest and shoulder. He took large strides towards Stormhammer, extending his right hand. Stormhammer sternly sized up the man in front of him, secretly assessing his level before he stood up and got into position as well. His hand held Gangdor’s with complete ease.

Letting out a roar, Gangdor began to exert his powers. However, Stormhammer’s body only shook slightly before he was stable once more. Orcs were normally gifted in strength, and Stormhammer was already level 14. Although Gangdor was equivalent to a level 13 human warrior himself, he couldn’t do anything to make the half-orc budge in arm wrestling. After all, this fellow was strong enough to exceed even a level 15 human warrior.

However, Stormhammer was still taken aback by this level of strength. He could already tell that Gangdor was only level 10.

After a few attempts that resulted in complete failure, Gangdor suddenly bellowed loudly. The rune on his body suddenly lit up, and brilliant rays of light spurted out from the magic formation. A surge of tremendous energy rushed forth like a tide, quickly exceeding Stormhammer’s resistance. The half-orc stumbled backwards, bellowing loudly as well. His body ended up flushing red as he brought forth his full power, only then managing to

resist the brute's force with some difficulty.

“Alright!” Richard called for the two to stop, pointing at the rune on Gangdor's body, “This is called a rune. It is a technique that is known solely to my family. Now, let's talk about its price.”

Stormhammer nodded, looking at the formation with astonishment. He'd felt the formidable strength that it had brought forth quite clearly, combining with Gangdor's own strength to form a raging force that almost could not be defied. If he could have such power... The half-orc leader's gaze began to blaze in anticipation, and he could almost see the next time he battled that wolf.

He led Richard to his warehouse, piling all the valuable resources he had collected over the years for the mage to pick.

When he saw a box of twenty magic crystals, his eyelids twitched a few times without control. However, when he then saw a yellowish-green ore with tiny crystals embedded in it. This was crystalline yellowsteel, and there was at least a kilogram of it!

Just as he reached over to pick up the crystalline yellowsteel from the ground, another material tumbled down from the pile of items. It looked like an ordinary piece of amber, but the interior was covered with veiny patterns. Holding the fist-sized piece of amber in hand, Richard could smell a faint smell of flora. His fingers trembled slightly as he recognised what this was— maple amber!

Book 2, Chapter 71

Trade

Crystalline yellowsteel and maple amber were very rare materials that were used in the crafting of grade 2 runes. The former came from unusual ore veins, while the latter could only be excavated from ancient ruins. Both were extremely scarce in Norland, sold by the gram. This piece of yellowsteel alone would be a hundred thousand gold back home, while the large maple amber could be sold for twice that.

His intelligence reports also gave him some understanding of the economics of this plane. Twenty magic crystals could be sold for nearly 10,000 coins, but that was only in the human empires. Because of how rare mages were and their monopoly on high-end magic equipment, few people purchased these things in bulk. There wasn't much demand from apprentices either.

And in the Bloodstained Lands, such top-notch materials were worth even less. Because of the chaos in control of the place, transportation costs themselves normally made for a third of the price. Even with all these goods one needed to stay alive to be able to ship them out. Thus, it was considered rather decent for this batch to be sold between 3,000 and 4,000 coins. Back in Norland they would be worth up to 20,000.

The fact that so much yellowsteel and maple amber could be in Stormhammer's stores without being segregated into their own piles meant that these materials were rather common in this plane, and they had limited use here. The prices indicated that this plane wasn't very advanced in alchemy, incomparable to the splendour of Norland.

Richard remained composed as he pointed to more than ten materials including the crystalline yellowsteel and maple amber, enquiring about their prices one by one. Sure enough, both were

only considered mediocre, priced at 200 to 300 coins.

The magic materials in Stormhammer's resources were worth a little more than 10,000 coins total, and with open trading channels could be sold back in the human kingdoms for nearly 30,000 gold. Even by looting the Church of Valour Richard had only acquired less than 100,000 but at this small camp on the outskirts of the Bloodstained Lands he'd gotten so much. This land clearly had ample opportunities.

Of course, these opportunities also meant the Bloodstained Lands were rife with fighting. This tribe of half-orcs wasn't even proficient at magic, but they had such an abundance of materials. It was obvious how these things were collected. Had he not portrayed aggression by executing the Blood Scythe without pause, Richard felt like his own materials would have added to this pile. Stormhammer was only negotiating with him because he revealed formidable magic.

Back in Norland, all these materials would be worth half a million coins! It was only now that Richard realised the true profit of planar warfare— it was ultimately a trade for rare goods between both planes.

Richard picked out all the materials he could use in addition to the box of magic crystals, worth about 8,000 coins in total. "All that, and twenty adult fighters."

Stormhammer hesitated slightly, but eventually the half-orc waved his hand. The materials were all wrapped up and tossed to Richard, after which he asked in a low voice, "When can I get my goods?"

"Three days later, but I'll need to activate it for you myself as well. That will take another day to complete."

Stormhammer smashed a nearby desk with his fist, speaking in a low voice, "I have waited five whole years, a few more days won't matter! But I hope you won't let me down!"

Richard seemed oblivious to the half-orc's murderous glare, weighing the bag in his hand and tossing it over to Gangdor as he spoke lightly, "I'm an esteemed mage, and as such I treasure my reputation. The world of magic is incomparably mysterious, not something ordinary people can understand. I would like to remind you that it is extremely foolish to doubt a mage!"

Another thud, and Stormhammer's beard blew in the wind. His muscles writhed in anticipation, but he eventually restrained his fury and did not act any further. He merely glared harshly at Richard, "Three days. I'll be waiting!"

Richard nodded, taking his generous profits along as he left Bloodstone Castle.

When they returned to the inn, Richard clapped Gangdor on the back and said with a laugh, "Well done!"

Gangdor grinned widely as he burst into raucous laughter, "I'm an expert at this! I've fooled my enemies into thinking I'm weaker than I am way too often!"

The brute had only activated a little more than half the powers of the rune while wrestling Stormhammer, the boost not even reaching 30%. However, the half-orc had been fooled into thinking that it was the peak of his power. This big fellow had turned purple in the face, the vein on his neck throbbing violently, but it was all an act. He'd even drenched himself with sweat, so much so that he nearly wet the ground he was standing on!

"Get used to your new rune, there will be more in the future," Richard said before carrying all the materials back to his room. He would sort and organise his immense profit, and with the inspiration from Flowsand he also had a few new rune concepts that he was lacking the materials to act upon. With this and the resources he already possessed, he could make nine standard runes instead of four, or six of the new runes he thought up as well.

However, just before he headed upstairs he saw Waterflower's

figure flash by. From behind, the young lady seemed a little... forlorn?

However, this doubt only flashed for a moment in his mind. Richard returned to his room and sorted out his new materials, setting up his tools to prepare for Stormhammer's rune.

The rune he was building retained the basic function, but severely lacked in all other areas of performance. The surface area tripled, but Stormhammer's back was broad enough to fit such a large rune. The parts of the spell formation that required more expensive materials were omitted where possible, while the circuit that lowered the capacity requirement was completely removed.

Lastly, the rune was designed to be active and not passive. The demand for capacity exceeded that of a grade 2 rune, and the energy consumption was 1.5 times higher than Gangdor's. However, the final boost was only 20%, and even that was not stable.

The only unique part of the design was an absorption array for embedded magic crystals. This allowed the mana in the crystals to activate the rune, one crystal allowing for about an hour and a half of activity. This meant the rune could only be fully activated nine to ten times.

Of course, the purpose of this was not to improve the rune's functionality. On the contrary, an array absorbing energy from magic crystals was far less complicated and required far fewer materials than other methods like those based on warriors' energy, mana, vitality, or even spiritual force.

Book 2, Chapter 72

Trade(2)

The magic crystal array wasn't just to simplify the design. Someone like Stormhammer, who had no knowledge of enchantments or magic in general, would be more impressed by it than plain-looking animal hide, even if the hide itself was the true representative of Richard's skill. In fact, if the rune was tattooed onto skin like in Flowsand's case it would look quite unassuming for its power. Even when activated it would only cause a dull glow.

However, Richard did not need to have Stormhammer display the full power of any rune. In this plane with no runemasters, even the 20% amplification would astonish people. A 40% increase would not be much different in effect. Rather than building a more powerful rune with six times the resources and eight times the crafting time, it would be more fruitful to beautify it and just make it look stronger instead. This would require some 'delicate' touch-up that made it look complicated enough for anyone looking to forget the actual effect.

Richard had studied art for a long time, so such designs would pose no problem. The additional time and effort spent on the task were so negligible that this way might as well be less complex. The elven blood in him contributed as well—elves were historically known in Norland to be superior at producing flashy items.

In Faelor, this attention to aesthetic would be equivalent to doubling the strength amplification from the rune itself in terms of selling price.

Those weren't the only reasons to make the rune look intricate. The spoils of war they'd seized in past raids indicated that the mages of this plane took pleasure in using the design of their equipment to denote status. From staffs to scrolls, weapons, and other magical products, they all looked exquisite and beautiful,

reflective of their status as high-end goods. To Stormhammer and most others who had seen magic artifacts before, this intricate design which displayed the working of the magic crystal was undoubtedly an extremely advanced artifact well worth 10,000 gold coins.

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When Flowsand knocked and entered at dinnertime, the rune was nearly finished. This thing wouldn't even be worthy of being called a defective product in Norland, but it had been sold at a price equivalent to 400,000 gold. It only took Richard three hours and less than a thousand coins worth of material to do this, and that included the hour spent in art. In comparison, the rune on Gangdor took up a week of Richard's time, with the materials being five times as expensive.

When Flowsand laid her eyes on the product, she immediately let out a low cry, "This thing... This... rune..."

"Crude?" Richard laughed heartily, "There's no need to produce quality goods for Stormhammer. We just need to match his expectations, and he only needs five minutes of a level's worth of boost to his strength."

Flowsand nodded, but she was unable to take her eyes off the newly-crafted rune. The thing looked really shoddy, a stark contrast from Richard's usual works. One familiar with the youth would struggle to believe that this trash had come from his hands.

In her eyes, all those beautiful lights and patterns were unappealing. They were all redundancies to be removed, and the only clear thing was the simplistic formation that formed the rune's core. To her, the perfect rune was one that used the minimum number of strokes.

However, despite this being such a shoddy piece of work the lines and curves were precise as ever. The core of his style still remained. Flowsand knew Richard had the proper idea, but this

rune seemed like a seasoned artist deliberately imitating a child's scribbles. It made even her unwavering mind feel a twinge of discomfort.

It took her a while to settle down and ask, "How much did this cost?"

"Less than a thousand coins," Richard replied calmly.

"That's so cheap! How?" Flowsand was shocked. Any rune in Norland cost at least 10,000 coins to make. Now it seemed like Richard was benefiting greatly from his partnership with Stormhammer.

"What about the amplification?"

"20%, and it's activated by a magic crystal."

She understood that this was a way to limit Stormhammer's capabilities. After all, he was a strong level 14 warrior. Even in a Norland Army he would be an officer, and with a proper rune he could become a rune knight. With the capabilities of Richard's current army, a level 14 rune knight would easily wipe them out.

But despite all that, despite agreeing with his actions, the priestess still felt that this rune was an extreme eyesore. Still, she settled down and opened a magically sealed box that she'd brought with her. She took out three magical scrolls from within, "These are some scrolls I prepared for Stormhammer. The first is a blessing, the second a magic shield, and the third is a heal. They can all be used by normal warriors, and are considered grade 3 scrolls."

"Spell scrolls?" This time, it was Richard who was shocked. He stared at Flowsand reproachfully, "Do we need to give him such valuable items? Aren't you afraid he'll use them and turn on us instead?"

"Why don't you have a closer look?" she laughed faintly.

In response, Richard carefully opened the healing scroll and

studied it. He was a master of enchantments, and his perception had long reached great heights. It took him a single look to realise that even if the material of the scroll was grade 3, there were pathetic amounts of mana within. The spell composition was different from usual as well, especially one unremarkable alteration...

Before he could ask Flowsand spoke up, “These are modified from the spells I obtained from the church. The spells are well and proper, but I only added enough mana in for them to be activated. The scroll will draw on Stormhammer’s own life force to run, and each scroll will shave as many years off his life as their grade. With one at each grade upto 3, that means a full six years off if he uses all three.

“I asked around, and the average life expectancy of the people of this plane is shorter than on Norland. It’s rare for them to live up to sixty years of age, and with Stormhammer being over forty this will shave his battle capabilities away.”

Richard let out a long sigh, carefully stowing the scrolls away in fear of accidentally activating them. It had taken large sacrifices for him to get the twenty years of life from the Eternal Dragon, and accidentally activating these things and losing six years of that would be extremely unfortunate.

With these sinister scrolls being adapted from the Church of Valour’s scrolls, even the church’s insignia was intact on them. Flowsand paid attention to detail, so this was definitely intentional. From an outsider’s perspective, this signified that one needed to pay a high price to cast the spells from the God of Valour, losing their lives to him. The church’s scrolls could in fact only be used by clerics, but nobody would believe that.

With that thought in mind, Richard cast a deep look at Flowsand, “It’s a good thing that I’m not your enemy.”

Flowsand smiled slightly, “But you want to be my man, that is

clearly worse!”

With that, Richard was rendered speechless.

Book 2, Chapter 73

Ritual

Three days later, the addition of the scrolls to the rune clearly surprised Stormhammer. Flowsand repeatedly emphasized that the dignity of the God of Valour could not be violated, and any ordinary person activating these scrolls would pay a hefty price, but the stricter her warning the more determined the hot-blooded half-orc grew.

At the end, Stormhammer personally chose twenty of his warriors for Richard as final payment for the rune, and thanked him for the scrolls as well. This group made for almost a third of the young elites of Bloodstone, and were it not for the scrolls Richard would likely only have gotten a troop of old, weak, sick, and lame soldiers.

Of course, he would have to wait until Stormhammer killed the Fleeting Shadow for them to truly obey him.

Early the next day, Stormhammer left Camp Bloodstone under a starlit sky, walking alone on a path of revenge. Richard took control of the new warriors the moment he left, wiping out the remnants of Mark's influence and taking control of the spring he used to own. With such a precedence and the alliance with Stormhammer, Howie, Chiron, and the rest maintained a silence that tacitly acknowledged the change in power.

He then began research on Red Cossack. It turned out that the Red Cossack wasn't merely the name of a person, but of one of the largest trade groups in the Bloodstained Lands. Any group that could prosper in this chaos was actually more terrifying than the bandits and horse thieves, more fierce than the orcs, desert people, and barbarians. Without being more vicious than all these groups, they would not be able to survive in the Bloodstained Lands and expand their influence.

Red Cossack was one of the largest slave trade groups in the Bloodstained Lands, with a guard troop comparable to a standard army. With more than 5000 warriors the army was like that of a human earl's, but with the constant fighting in the Bloodstained Lands the individual warriors far surpassed common soldiers. Besides, that wasn't even their strongest combat force. That honour belonged to the slaving parties.

Most slaves shipped out of the Bloodstained Lands were powerful barbarians and desert dwellers who were good at battle, with the occasional orcs as well. The slavers worked all year round, and all of them were bloodthirsty hunters.

The vanguard he'd sent ahead had encountered a border guard of the Red Cossack. Of course, the title of border guard was just in name. Most of the time, they acted as horse thieves. The red-armoured knight leading them was actually quite infamous—the name of Red Hook and his cavalry was known to many people even outside the Bloodstained Lands.

A small flame shot forth from Richard's palm, lighting the few pages of information he'd acquired on fire. He watched as they burnt to ash.

'Red Cossack... Looks like a pretty good target, and I have a righteous reason too. You snatched a hundred horses, so I might as well wipe you out...' Richard thought, as he casually summoned a gust of wind to blow the ashes out the window.

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It took five days for Stormhammer to return. The half-orc's skin had turned an abnormal green, and he had many more wrinkles on his face now. It seemed like he'd aged ten years in the mere five days, his three braids now far more grey than black. Although he stood with his head held high, one could see a faint hunch in his back and sense the added weight to his steps.

Despite all that, however, the aged half-orc had glistening eyes. The huge enchanted hammer that he'd named after himself was in his left hand, with a wolf head larger than a lion's lifted up in his right. His leathern robes were torn everywhere, and many open wounds could be seen under the cloth padding.

Stormhammer stood at the gate of Bloodstone, holding the wolf head high as he screamed with all his might, "This is the Fleeting Shadow, the mighty beast that ate a dozen of our brave warriors. It's head is now in my hands, can you see?!"

The warriors guarding the camp's entrance howled one after the other, clashing weapons or hitting their chests with their fists. More and more of them gathered, and Stormhammer continued to hold the head up high. Every raise of his arm was met with loud cheering from the half-orcs, and the cheering grew even louder as it spread throughout Camp Bloodstone.

"They really are a group of heroic warriors. That Stormhammer isn't bad either," Richard praised sincerely from the top floor of their inn.

Flowsand spoke calmly from beside him, "Do you feel regret for letting him use my scrolls? If you have even the tiniest bit, do think of the origin of those materials he gave us."

"No, this isn't regret..." Richard's gaze remained fixed on the half-orc as he went silent for a moment, "... I was just reminded of something. If I fight in interplanar wars for a long time, I don't know if I will change; I don't know what I will change into."

"I will not let you lose direction as long as I am around," Flowsand said confidently, a smile on her face.

"I'm not saying I'll lose myself... Rather, I might grow cold and bloodthirsty," Richard explained.

"That, isn't it inevitable?" Flowsand looked at Richard innocently. Of course, her bottom was pinched heavily in return.

Stormhammer sent someone to invite Richard and his men to their tribal celebration soon after he returned to Camp Bloodstone. And before this banquet, he specifically invited Richard to their sacrificial ritual.

The altar of the bloodstone orcs was buried deep underground in their castle, centred around the statue of a strong orc warrior. This seemed to be the strongest fighter in their history, Bloodstone himself. Once he broke through to the ranks of saint warriors, the entire tribe was named after him.

There were several other statues as well, smaller but about the same size as ordinary orcs, that surrounded the altar. These were great warriors in the history of the tribe, those like Bloodstone who'd also become saint warriors themselves. Stormhammer originally had a glimmer of hope to have his statue join these ranks, but his vengeance against the Fleeting Shadow and his desire for the tribe's survival had led him to use Flowsand's scrolls. This had completely ruined his hopes of advancing.

Richard was the only outsider in the underground ritual hall, the rest being the strongest warriors and smartest elders of Bloodstone, making for a dozen-odd orcs in total. Stormhammer began by singing a sorrowful and vigorous warsong, placing the head of the Fleeting Shadow on the altar.

All the orcs sang in resonance, surrounding the altar as they started a powerful ancient war dance. The steps were clumsy yet powerful, the voices hoarse yet majestic. Richard's heart began to throb to the strong beat, and he gradually seemed to fuse into the ancient and mysterious atmosphere in the hall.

Book 2, Chapter 74

Ritual(2)

Once the singing came to a close, the head started to tremble. The clot on the neck broke apart, blood flowing freely once more to rise up the altar and converge at the hammer beside the sculpture's leg. It eventually permeated into the statue itself, giving it a life of its own. Richard faintly felt a strong consciousness awakening within.

The statue's eyes turned a blood red, its gaze seemingly sweeping across everyone in this ancestral hall. When it looked upon Richard, the eyes abruptly grew exuberant. Richard felt a disturbance in his mind like a thunderclap, as if thousands of ferocious lions were roaring at the same time. He was jolted in an instant, his vision going black as he nearly lost consciousness.

However, a few strong minds immediately entered his own mindscape to help fight off this imposing will. They managed to eliminate the invader immediately, freeing his mind. The orc ancestor could not stand up to the combined might of Waterflower, the broodmother, and his slaves.

Unexpectedly, the broodmother's strength of will surpassed that of even Waterflower herself. Zendrall— who had buried his head in research— was also made aware of the battle, and joined in to assist. However his oath was much weaker than a true contract, and the fuzzy connection didn't let him transmit too much of his power. If not for that, his strong spiritual force as exhibited in that swamp battle would have dealt a heavy blow to the invading consciousness.

The spiritual battle ended in a flash, and Stormhammer and the remaining orcs suddenly felt great pain in their brains as they collapsed to the ground. By the time they recovered from the shock, they discovered that the wolf head had dried up to look like a dessicated corpse. The statue had stopped glowing, and the

lingering energy from the ritual had disappeared.

Stormhammer dizzily pressed into his head, staring blankly in the direction of the altar. The fall had left him throbbing with pain all over his injured body, so intense that his face distorted. He looked at his men as they did at him, but none were able to figure out what had actually happened. They ended up concluding that the sacrifice had summoned the presence of their ancestors, but they were too weak to accept that might.

The elders and warriors regained their composure quickly, while Stormhammer himself limped his way towards Richard. The half-orc gazed solemnly into his eyes, “Majestic mage from afar, your assistance has allowed me to kill the Fleeting Shadow, and in doing so avenged the fallen warriors of our tribe. You have seen our rituals, and from henceforth shall be considered a friend of the bloodstone orcs for eternity. We may not be strong, but if the need ever rises you can trust us to lay our lives down for our friends!”

As he said that, Stormhammer reached out with both arms to give Richard a hug, completing the ceremony. Feeling that powerful embrace and looking at the withered face and injured body, Richard felt an inexplicable sensation in his heart. Had he made a rune similar to Gangdor’s, Stormhammer would not have had to use Flowsand’s scrolls to win. He would not have reached the end of his life so quickly.

And yet right now, the half-orc proved to be a true warrior, a qualified leader and trustworthy friend.

However, he suddenly remembered Flowsand’s words earlier in the day, that the resources he’d been given had obviously been acquired from somewhere else. There was a considerable amount of blood behind each item, and Camp Bloodstone itself was not known for its hospitality to commoners. Many deaths had occurred under Stormhammer’s charge.

Several strange feelings mixed together, leaving Richard at a loss

as to how he should judge the bloodstone orcs. He ended up just sighing silently in his heart, remembering his own identity as an invader.

The Bloodstained Lands were chaotic and cruel, but they still held a child-like purity. It was hard to tell right from wrong.

Before leaving the ancestral hall, Richard looked at the sculpture once more. The consciousness should have been dealt a heavy blow, returning to the depths of the statue to recuperate. He'd felt a strong hint of divinity within that consciousness, the only reason it could contain the remaining will of Bloodstone.

This was Richard's first experience with the power of ancestral worship.

He now understood why the broodmother would want these idols; it wanted to suck out this divine power from within. However, for now at least, he did not want to touch the bloodstone tribe's altar.

'In any case, as far as I can see there are countless tribes in the Bloodstained Lands and beyond that practise ancestral worship. I just need to slowly seek them out and I'll be able to find many. As for Bloodstone... I can just wait for Stormhammer to die and figure things out then. He won't be living much longer anyway.' Such was the way the young mage consoled himself, rationalising the situation...

The ritual was followed by a tribal celebration. Several bonfires were burnt in the semi-circular arena, and barbecued meat and shoddy liquor handed out. The orcs surrounding the bonfires danced their war dance to the beat of the drum, stopping every now and then with a stomp of their feet as they raised their chests and bellowed a warcry out into the sky. This was a tradition passed down from ancient times, an oath to their ancestors that they would protect their homeland. Once tired of the dancing the orcs would sit down, eating meat and drinking alcohol to replenish

themselves before they joined their brethren once more.

The banquet that night played host to a number of special guests. Apart from Richard were the two trolls as well, having prepared a big pot of fragrant meat soup for the occasion. The standard of the soup alone qualified Medium Rare and Tiramisu to call themselves gourmets, but till date this was the only dish Richard had seen them cook. It seemed like this was the only thing they knew.

The only thing Richard couldn't stand in the midst of all this merriment was the alcohol. He was forced to drink three full bowls with Stormhammer, each bowl sized for orcs. He also had a bowl each with the orcish elders and then one with each famous warrior of the tribe.

By the time it all ended, Richard had to be carried away on Medium Rare's back. He wasn't completely drunk, but the churning of his stomach made him feel weak and it felt like his brain was on fire. All prudence and apprehension vanished in this daze, but the drinks had netted him a considerable reward. He came out with thirty half-orc warriors, not twenty. Unfortunately, the ten additions were only ordinary soldiers and not elites.

Medium Rare had a steady gait and his back was wide and flat, but Richard still vomited twice on the way back to their inn. Throwing up made him feel a little better, the cool wind of the late night freshening up his mind. However, the alcohol still burning in his blood made his consciousness foggy.

As they travelled, Richard started thinking about the next day. There was not much reason for them to continue on in Bloodstone now, and the insignificant stream or even the entire camp weren't his true goals. They weren't even good enough to be considered a start.

Besides, he was an invader after all. Camp Bloodstone wasn't far from the human kingdoms, and if Neian decided to send an army into the Bloodstained Lands his current forces would be in

significant danger. Essien's strength and the fearlessness of the paladins even in the face of death had left a lasting impression in his mind. Had that been a direct battle, the victory would have been bitter. Since he'd already reaped his rewards from Bloodstone, it was time to go even deeper.

By the time he decided on their path, Richard found that they were at the entrance of the inn. He finally mustered up the strength to walk on his own, and thus waved the trolls away to get some rest. Sleep was more important to trolls than humans— their power grew depending on how well they slept.

His already-empty stomach started to churn again, making him feel like throwing up. He dashed across the hall and opened the back door, preparing to find a corner to relieve himself in.

Book 2, Chapter 75

The First Visit

As soon as he entered the backyard, Richard suddenly felt a strange feeling envelop him. He quietly stopped moving, using the door to prop himself up.

The yard of the inn was quite large, and the presence of the stables and lots of junk made it look very disorderly. A ghostly white figure was flying around under the night sky, gliding across the air as if it was water. Her eye-grabbing white outfit looked fuzzy as the air seemed to glide around her, as though gray lightning dancing around her body.

This was Waterflower!

Richard quietly stood beside the door without disturbing her. The young lady seemed not to notice, moving around the messy backyard without issue. She was fast as lightning yet completely quiet, blended into the night sky and its surroundings. Judging from her speed she'd levelled up, but even then she would need to have acquired a skill to reach this limit.

It took an unknown amount of time for the girl to finally tire, appearing in front of Richard with a flash. She lifted her tiny face, fixing her gaze onto him.

Richard looked closely at her as he asked, "You upgraded in level? And you have a new skill?"

Waterflower sounded her agreement, speaking slowly yet awkwardly, "Level 10 now. New skill... You could call it Wind Walk, it's what I showed just now."

There was a wild side to the girl's pure eyes, but there was something else in her gaze as well. She still had that scraggly short hair she cut herself with her sword, and the awkward and rigid tone showed how seldom she interacted with other people. Even

now, as a member of Richard's party, she was no different.

These few sentences were enough for Richard to finally realise how much he was neglecting his soulguard. She seemed like a lone wolf, always carefully avoiding humans, but he just hadn't taken the initiative to get to know her further.

He muttered inaudibly to himself for a while before speaking up, "Wind Walk? It seems powerful. I'll come look for you in a few days, let's see if I can craft a suitable rune."

The young lady's eyes brightened up for a moment, but she remained silent and only nodded her head.

The alcohol seemed to be fading from Richard's bloodstream by that time, but the headache started to grow worse. The pain was extraordinary, as if something inside him was tearing his mind apart. He let out a low groan, rubbing his forehead as he waved at Waterflower and proceeded up the stairs to his own room. The orcish alcohol was disgusting, but it was strong and the hangover was violent. He struggled to bear with the intense pain as he got back in his room.

He scanned the entirety of his room out of habit as he entered, a habit cultivated under Naya's tutelage in the Deepblue. Whoever one was, being attacked at random every few days as you entered the room would imprint such a habit onto oneself. This was merely habit, however, and once he was done scanning the room Richard prepared to throw himself onto the bed.

However, his body suddenly grew rigid as all his hairs stood on end. His breathing came to a halt, and he scanned across the room inch by inch from left to right. Details about the things he usually ignored grew clear and magnified.

Now he could confirm the anomaly in the illumination in the bedroom, which was darker than usual. Even with the clouds covering the moon and stars some light normally seeped into the place, it should not have been as dark as it was.

He tried to look over once again, this time concentrating on the shadows everywhere. He was finally able to make out the outline of shadows slowly making their way towards him from the other end of the room.

He exhaled slowly, shifting his body to the right. Two metres away, the nameless sword was standing erect against a corner of the wall. The shadows seemed to sense the unusual movement, however, suddenly coming to a stop.

Richard's heart filled with an overwhelming sense of danger as the shadows began to converge onto a position. A creature that looked like a tigress appeared in the room, a smooth black figure made of formless shadows. A pair of faint red dots blinked into existence on its face, watching Richard with a cold stare.

All Richard saw in those eyes was a cold desolation. There were no emotions behind that hollow existence, none of the intimidation a predator put on its prey. It was merely... empty.

In the short period of time the shadows needed to take form, he'd taken the opportunity to glide two steps forward and get his hands on the hilt of his blade. His heart immediately calmed down, as he managed to identify this being and subconsciously go through the information he had about it.

This was a nightmare panther, a low-level nightmare creature known for its speed and cunning. Even as the lowest tier of nightmare creature, however, it still carried all that came with that name. These beings spent most of their time travelling the void between planes, braving the violent energy within. It was strong and mysterious unlike a planar being, with even the weakest of nightmare panthers being between level 11 and 12. Their intellect also far surpassed other beasts, the median of their intelligence comparable to shamans and mages. Higher-level nightmare creatures were smarter than legendary beings, some even more clever than demigods!

The panther in front of Richard crouched low, bending forward in preparation to attack. However, just as it was about to raise its paws a strong smell of sulphur burst forth from Richard's body, and a silver full moon flashed into existence above his head. The edge of his longsword started blazing with the power of the silver moon, the tip flying out to strike at the creature!

Eruption and a secret sword of Silvermoon. Richard had brought all he could to bear in but an instant!

The nightmare panther had already leapt forward, but it still awkwardly maintained the same crouching stance in mid-air. It fell onto Richard's blade, as though it had sent itself to its death.

The sixth secret sword: Snow Moon. Silver moonforce pervaded the area, forming a spiral of attacks that would not stop till the target was killed. The tip of the sword penetrated the nightmare panther's body, but the creature did not flee at all. The shadows grew more viscous as they wrapped around the blade, making Richard feel like it had suddenly sunk into a marsh. Even moving a single step proved to be difficult.

Richard reacted instantly, however. He let out a loud cry as he placed both hands on the sword, energy bursting forth from his entire body as the fourth moon took its place atop his head instead. The moonforce at the edge of the blade turned blue instead of silver.

The fourth secret sword: Annihilation!

The room was suddenly filled with gleaming blue moonlight that tore all the shadows apart. Richard's body crashed into the nightmare panther, the energy tearing it completely apart. As the creature died, he finally managed to shatter the countless shadows apart.

Book 2, Chapter 76

The First Visit(2)

The blade flew through the air without pause, halting only when it was buried into the opposite wall upto the hilt. Richard maintained his stance, finally letting out a deep breath that he'd saved up. Immense fatigue flooded his body, nearly drowning out his consciousness. Sweat poured out of him like a torrent, instantly drenching his clothes as he swayed on the verge of collapse. Were he not holding tightly onto the hilt of his sword, it was likely he wouldn't even be able to stand in place.

He'd used up all of his energy to deal those two blows, bringing out his fullest in the face of impending death. However, this meant that he had drained practically every bit of his strength to do so.

THUD! Gangdor suddenly shuttled through the room's door, and Waterflower who was a step earlier stood silently against the wall. The two of them looked at the chaos in the bedroom, but for a moment they didn't understand what exactly had happened. They looked at the window simultaneously, as if in sync with each other. That was the only exit, but the window was half-closed and the curtains were not drawn. Everything looked perfectly intact, and it didn't seem like any enemies had fled the scene. There were no traces within the room either.

Flowsand rushed into the room right after, and as she took in the surroundings her face instantly fell. She squatted down, looking at a few inconspicuous scratches on the floor before reaching out to touch them. They resembled the claws of a beast, and these ones had come from the nightmare panther. There were still remnants of shadowforce left behind, something she clearly managed to notice.

“Nightmare creatures?” she asked, her tone sombre for once.

Richard nodded, before lowering his head to look at his own

chest. The clothes covering his chest had split open, revealing three long cuts. Fine red lines had appeared on his bare skin, eventually splitting apart to reveal the flesh underneath. The incisions were extremely even and smooth, penetrating all the way through his body and only stopping at his ribs.

A moment later, Richard collapsed on his back amidst a spurt of blood.

A day had passed by the time Richard eventually woke up. He was laid on his bed, his chest wrapped snugly with bandages. The bandages were tight but not painful, a display of outstanding technique that could only have come from Flowsand.

He tried to move but his chest immediately started hurting, so he had no choice but to lie back down. This was another distressing thing about nightmare creatures: spell resistance. Shadowforce lingered on in the wounds of those they injured, able to counter the healing energy of magic and divine spells and diminish the effects of even greater heals. Those injuries inflicted by powerful nightmare creatures could render such spells useless until one found a way to disperse the shadowforce. Otherwise, one could only wait for the power to dissipate on its own. The only choice would be to use herbal medicine to boost the body's natural healing, trying to recover normally. As a result, many who sustained serious injuries from nightmare creatures ended up dying helplessly or being crippled due to the lack of treatments.

Dim light began to seep into the room, indicating that it was the crack of dawn. Everything outside was quiet, with no movements at all. Most people were still sound asleep.

Bedridden as he was, Richard couldn't help but think back to the battle with the nightmare panther. Nightmare creatures had no physical presence, relying on their powers to advance or retreat. The crouching was only to confuse the opponent, the attack had already begun.

Richard had read up as much as he could about nightmare creatures once he found out about his situation, and his powerful intellect clearly retained all the information he had acquired. Thus, he immediately launched his own attack when he saw the nightmare panther crouch. Had he delayed any further, it wouldn't have been as simple as getting clawed in the chest.

Since they had no physical presence, regular attacks did not affect nightmare creatures. Fortunately, he could still draw upon Alucia's power in this plane. The damage the moonforce inflicted upon the creature was evident as well, and this calmed him down a little. He knew now he would not be completely helpless in any future encounters.

Nightmare panthers were amongst the weakest of nightmare creatures. Since one had already appeared, more would be soon to follow. In the future, the battles would not be as simple as this one was. Lying quietly on the bed, Richard began to recall every detail of his battle with the nightmare panther over and over again.

The fight had ended in a short instant, but Richard knew better deep down. He could feel himself being pushed forth by the formidable power of the blue moon, moonforce bursting forth from the edge of his sword to boost Annihilation to the next level. The explosive power had thoroughly shattered all the shadowforce the panther had managed to gather.

And despite all that, the panther's claws had reached his chest before it was destroyed. The blades of energy that came from its paw had made their way right into his body, leaving a strange icy sensation coursing through him as his flesh was sliced apart. Any deeper and the creature would have cut his ribs open, stabbing into his heart. With the spell resistance of shadowforce, the rupture of his heart would have been incurable. Flowsand, only level 9 still, definitely would not be able to salvage the situation.

His soul shuddered at the prospect of another close shave with death. Richard wasn't afraid of risk, but that did not mean he

didn't fear death itself. Death was the end of everything. He had many hopes to fulfill, and boundless prospects ahead for him in the vast future. If he died, all of that would boil down to nothing. Far too much in the boundless planes was still undiscovered; there were a lot of exciting and wonderful moments he had yet to experience in his mortal life.

The more important a character was, the more unwilling they would be to die. This was not simply due to fear. They held responsibilities, worries, and a great deal of unfulfilled wishes in their hearts.

And thus, Richard savoured the fear of his brush with death repeatedly to strengthen his endurance. He hoped to overcome this fear one day, and face it with ease. The calmer he was when coping with death, the greater his chances of survival would be. Although he wasn't afraid of risk, risk without any assurance turned courage into foolishness. One who charged forth despite a slim chance of victory were not wise.

These two days had been unsettling. He'd endured the will of Bloodstone, witnessed Waterflower's breakthrough and her new skill. He'd also gone through a life and death battle with a nightmare creature, employing two secret swords in succession alongside Eruption to eliminate the first of many that would arrive from some foreign place. He had suffered a close shave with death once more.

Book 2, Chapter 77A

Inspiration

Recalling the incidents of the past two days, as well as everything that had happened ever since he entered Faelor, Richard felt like his blood was boiling. The inspiration from his conversation with Flowsand appeared once more, this time growing clearer and clearer by the moment. It was like a playful wisp of fire, tempting him continuously but not letting him catch it.

He didn't hurry it along, instead stopping to ponder quietly. At that moment, all the lessons in philosophy from the Deepblue passed through his mind. 'Your thinking dictates everything!' The words that almost every teacher of his shouted before dismissing the class reverberated through his head. He realised that he was passively responding to the changes in his surroundings, rarely thinking of the path he was prepared to take.

The pursuit of power was an empty catchphrase. A realistic question would be to ask what means he could take to obtain that strength, and how far he could go.

As far as he could see, the laws on Faelor and Norland were quite similar. Although the limit of Faelor's power was lower than Norland's, it was still a plane that could produce people of legendary might. At the very least, he himself was far from being suppressed by the laws.

However, the many battles had revealed several other key differences between the planes. An enemy who seemed comparable to them on the surface would be easy to win against, and in fact most of the time it was without any issue. Outside of Flowsand, he himself, the broodmother, Waterflower, Gangdor, and other unique factors, one other stark difference between the two planes had already reared its head.

Runes!

The art of runecrafting that Norland had developed over millennia was the ultimate manifestation of the application of magic for war. Gangdor with a single rune could compete against opponents who were two to three levels higher than him for a short duration, and if he had a complete set of runes that suited him he could easily defeat even a level 14 Stormhammer.

Any standard rune knight that he built up with his knowledge would be able to compare to a saint class of Faelor. Knights at level 13 to 14 would be pushed to level 17, some even to level 18. It was as though a large number of powerhouses could be created out of thin air. If at equal numbers Faelor could perhaps resist Norland's might, the appearance of runes and armies of rune knights that were thousands strong all comparable to saint classes would easily tear this plane's resistance apart.

As for he himself, his talent, position, resources... Most of what made him unique came from runes.

It was only then that Richard understood the importance of his philosophy classes. It wasn't to show him a constant path to success, instead to teach him a framework for his thought process that would elevate him.

With the answer found, inspiration came naturally. The spark floating before him was completely within reach, and could be grabbed with a stretch of the hand. And thus he stretched out, grabbing hold of this spark to come to a realisation.

However, even after capturing the inspiration Richard refused to let go. On the contrary, his grip grew stronger as he rubbed it, the feeling of that flame disappearing from his mind. His hand began to feel a soft elasticity.

At that moment, Flowsand's hoarse voice rang in his ears, "You're pinching my rear."

"It can't be," Richard opened his eyes to see Flowsand beside his bed, "I'm grabbing a hold of inspiration." He did not let go, instead

pinching it harder a few times.

“What about now, then?” she asked, “Is it still a mistake?”

He smirked in response, “Now? I’m touching your butt of course!”

Flowsand took a step closer to the bedside, allowing him to easily touch more of her. She also asked, “Do you want me to take off my clothes? But looking at your current health, it doesn’t really seem suitable.”

Richard snorted, stretching out and smacking her rear. The exertion affected the wound on his chest, however, and his face paled with pain. Enduring it with much effort, Richard let out a breath of turbid air, “Heal me quickly, I know you have a way!”

Flowsand removed the bandage on his body as she spoke, “I just thought of a way, but it won’t be able to solve the root of the problem. Shadowforce is not simple. Its origin is more profound than that of any deity on this plane.”

The wound on his chest was aired, but it revealed that the three slashes hadn’t closed up. The bleeding was only stopped due to thick ointment, and shadowforce lingered around that as well. Richard felt a faint darkness in the corner of his vision.

Flowsand took out a bottle of colourless water. However, the overflowing mana it showed upon removal indicated that this was far from ordinary. “This will hurt a bit, bear with it.”

Richard nodded without much worry. His will was quite firm, and he was confident of his tolerance for pain.

Flowsand tilted the bottle in her hand, pouring the water onto Richard’s wound. The moment it came into contact with the lingering shadowforce, it was as though it had been poured into a hot pan. It instantly started boiling, splattering everywhere as it released large amounts of mist.

At that instant, the severe pain caused Richard to black out. His

body abruptly jumped off the bed, before falling back down once more. This was an instinctive reaction to the severe pain. He also opened his mouth wide, his face beginning to distort. Being able to hold it in without screaming was already his limit, but he still let out a few guttural roars.

How was this a 'bit?' This was clearly torture!

And yet, the holy water had eliminated all traces of the shadowforce on the wound. Traces of black lines could be seen entangled with holy light, reluctantly fading into the mist.

Flowsand began chanting, and two greater heals fell upon Richard's body. The wound on his chest closed up at a visible speed under the magic's effect, and in the next two to three days it would heal completely.

Following that, Flowsand continued her chants. This time the spell took three to four times longer than a greater heal, and the mana consumed was just as great. A ray of divine light fell upon Richard's body, causing the searing pain to fade in an instant. This was Restoration, a grade 5 spell. Greater heals only affected surface injuries, unable to fix bones or internal damage. This was where restoration came in. The nightmare panther had penetrated Richard's chest, leaving a row of incisions on his ribs. Without restoration, it would take as long as three months for him to recover.

Book 2, Chapter 77B

Inspiration(2)

Flowsand immediately grew weak after she cast restoration. She knelt down, her upper body lying on his bedside. However, Richard had just healed from his injuries, and the baptism of the holy water had left him leaking cold sweat. At that moment, he didn't even have the strength to sit up.

Both of these weakened bodies ended up leaning against each other.

Finally calming his breathing a little, Richard asked, "Flowsand, the holy water didn't feel right."

Flowsand nodded, answering lazily a few moments later, "What's wrong with holy water that has divine power infused? It's a little painful, I admit, but isn't it very effective?"

"How is that a little?!" Richard didn't know whether to laugh or cry. He barely lifted his hand to comb through Flowsand's hair, "Why do I feel the God of Valour's power in it?"

"Well it's holy water with divine power infused. Did I say it came from the Eternal Dragon?"

"Where did it come from, though? I don't remember taking any from the church." Richard was puzzled.

"Didn't I take a lot of scrolls? I gained some understanding of Neian's power, so I infused it into the holy water while I was modifying those scrolls. That way, I wouldn't be wasting the extracted energy."

Richard was taken aback, "You can steal divine power?"

"Isn't that something normal?" Flowsand stated as a matter of fact, "It's no big deal. Only the people of this plane think that the deities are omniscient, omnipotent, and cannot be deceived. It

isn't difficult to make use of the power of a lesser deity like Neian.

"Speaking of, there's someone named Theodore who really excelled in this field. Not only could he steal divine power, he could even deceive gods themselves and intercept faith! Forget small fry like Neian, he managed to deceive the gods of a primary plane! Right, he's been living in the Deepblue all these years. I remember you said you attended his class before."

Richard was rendered speechless. Such words could come from anyone, but uttered by a priestess herself made him feel an indescribable sense of discomfort. Theodore had given him an impression of someone knowledgeable and somewhat dull; he hadn't expected the man to be so remarkable as to intercept divine faith itself.

"Be careful to avoid his detection. We're still in his territory, and aren't ready to withstand divine punishment yet," he warned seriously.

"Yes!" Flowsand nodded firmly, looking obedient and adorable. She didn't seem one bit like someone who would dare to steal divine power.

"We need to stay here for a month longer, I have some matters to attend to. It might be faster, but a month at most," Richard said.

Flowsand was a bit surprised, "Is it something important? I thought we were going to leave this place already!"

"Yes, very important!"

"How important?"

Richard lifted Flowsand's chin, staring into her bottomless amber eyes, "Extremely. So important that if I succeed, you can prepare to resist."

"I'm always ready," Flowsand smiled.

Only after another entire day of rest could Richard move freely,

and he headed straight for Waterflower's room when he got out of bed. His soulguard had been moved to the largest room on this floor as per his instructions, with two adjacent rooms opened up completely to give her a huge space of more than 200 square metres.

It was already deep into the night, but Richard moved his worktable and tools into the young lady's room. His table was filled with all sorts of magic materials.

The girl stood in the center of the room, looking like an ethereal spirit. There were no lights within, the only illumination being the rays of moonlight shining through the window. The moonlight reflected off her, making her look even more beautiful and unearthly.

Waterflower knew that Richard was crafting runes for her, and it filled her with a strong sense of anticipation and some nervousness. Richard took a deep breath and let it out, calming himself down before hinting for the young lady to remove her clothes.

Waterflower was stunned by the request, hesitant to complete it. She seemed to think of something quite quickly, however, beginning to remove all her clothes to stand before him fully naked.

This was a near-perfect body. Her smooth skin was unblemished, the two average breasts perky and her legs slender and long. Unlike Flowsand, Waterflower's body was filled with a sense of strength. However, it also seemed illusionary as though enveloped in layers of mist.

Scanning over her with a spell, Richard walked up to Waterflower and circled around her. He closely observed every inch of her skin as close as possible, muttering to himself, "This is truly a work of god, it's supreme art! It seems like the concept will work out..."

At that moment, Richard was completely immersed in the wonderful world of runes and magic. He didn't notice the young lady's breathing growing more rapid, nor her body trembling slightly. At that moment, every part of this perfect body was radiating a magical light: her carrying capacity was so great that he would go crazy! Although Waterflower hadn't unlocked anything else from her bloodline upon reaching level 10, her rune capacity had increased. She was now on par with Flowsand in that regard! In Richard's eyes, Waterflower was the ideal rune knight that any runemaster could only dream of.

By this point he'd made it behind her, half-squatting with his face less than ten centimetres away from her body. His gaze slowly moved down, tracing the curve of her butt. This beautiful line fit perfectly with the idea for a rune that he had in his mind. He was engulfed in happiness for a moment, and couldn't help stretching out to touch that perfect skin.

However, the girl's body heated up the moment his fingertips made contact. It seemed as though an intense flame had been ignited within her body.

Originally lost in the world of runes, Richard suddenly felt his heart clench. Before his body could respond the world was turned upside down, shaking hard. A loud bang sounded out as various lights flashed in his vision. All his internal organs seemed to be displaced, the pain from the severe impact excruciating.

However, things were not over. He felt a sharp pain in his rear, and in that moment he could see Waterflower killing him. "STOP!" he screamed.

At that moment, the girl was already pressing down on his back with one hand, the other trained against his butt in preparation to strike. It wouldn't matter even if there were no steel spikes in the Archeron death camps, because her hands were actually even more powerful. There was more than one fellow who had his intestines ripped out by her hand.

With the loud exclamation, Waterflower awoke from her shock. Her mind being blank before, she'd moved on instinct and only now did she realise what she had done. She immediately pulled back at the speed of lightning, her entire person silently retreating a few metres. She stood straight, staring down at an area ten centimetres in front of her feet. She looked so well-behaved it was as if nothing had happened just now.

Book 2, Chapter 78

Breath of Darkness

Richard struggled to stand up, a stinging pain burning his shoulder. Thankfully he could still walk, meaning his injuries weren't too severe. Unaware that his clothes were already in tatters, he reached his hand behind himself only to feel something warm and damp. When he pulled it back, all he could see was fresh crimson blood.

“WATERFLOWER!” he rebuked angrily.

The girl shivered ever so slightly, but she made no attempt to move. It was almost as if she'd heard nothing, her expression blank. However, this was only proof that she was far from calm in her heart— even if the girl was one of few words and expressions, her eyes were rarely so empty. Most of the time she observed her surroundings with the gaze of a hunter eyeing its prey.

Richard tried to move, finding that it wasn't too bad. The injuries were minor cuts that didn't affect his mobility, and would heal easily with a lesser heal. Even without the use of magic they would heal in three to five days. However, the problem was this: how was he to account to Flowsand about these injuries?

He could already imagine what a laughing stock he would become once the priestess found out. Were he to one day grow famous as a saint runemaster, he was sure that this woman would publish a book titled ‘The Secret History of the Saint’ and include all the details of this event within. Passing his deeds down through generations, she could earn a bit of fame as well. In fact, as a cleric of the Eternal Dragon she could do much more than just spreading this tale far and wide. It was quite possible that she would put this book in the Church of the Eternal Dragon!

Sighing, Richard just tended to his wounds and decided to let them heal on their own. Clenching his teeth he walked towards

Waterflower, inspecting her body once more as some of his concepts gained added details. Once he got to work the episode gradually slipped from his mind, and he immersed himself in the world of runes.

A short while later, he started to mess up the room in a mad frenzy, haphazardly setting several chairs in the middle to form obstacles. He then had the girl demonstrate her skill— Wind Walk.

Once again Waterflower floated up like a specter, and the faster she flew the less of a hindrance the obstacles became. At times the obstacles only supported her, or became objects to defend herself with.

By now she was completely naked. Every move she made, the relaxation of every inch of her skin, it was all clearly revealed in front of Richard. The girl's body had a wonderful cycle of tensing and relaxing, with most of her time spent loose and extended as she glided through the air. Her body then curled up tightly, tapping lightly on the next place she would land. Her beautiful silhouette would then burst forth with immense power, catapulting out like a hunting wolf.

The entire process was silent and wordless, the darkness embracing her as always. Indeed, the girl was a ruler of shadows and complicated environments.

With the last of his inspiration acquired, Richard waved for her to stop and had her lie down in bed. He didn't bother spending the time to light a lamp, illuminating the room with a spell as he grabbed his pen.

The girl lay quietly on her back as Richard used his pen, pricking her calf to draw elegant and complicated lines.

Time passed quietly in the tranquil night. One pen replaced another, and bit by bit the materials were slowly emptied into her calf. The illumination spell faded an hour into the task, but Richard still wouldn't spare the few seconds it would take to light a

lamp. He instead just cast another spell and continued on.

Someone knocked on the door at dawn, seemingly to ask about breakfast. However, they were immediately turned away by a 'Don't disturb me!' Richard hadn't even listened to them.

He'd prepared a total of 37 pens, and by the time he was through every one of them the sky had grown dark once more. Waterflower had beautiful patterns all over her right leg, all the way from the knee to the ankle. Most of the tattoo was blue and black, but there was an occasional deep violet as well.

Setting the brush down, Richard felt slightly faint. A whole night of high-intensity work had completely depleted his power, leaving him with no choice but to take a short break.

A night of meditation didn't just recover Richard's mana. He also gained a deeper awareness of the world of magic, inspiration surging once more as he developed even more ideas for the girl's rune set.

He thus took out all of his materials, including the piece of maple amber. Carefully slicing a third of it off with a mithril knife, he grinded the gem into powder before dissolving it into the rest of his ink. The mix was allowed to rest for an hour and then filtered, purifying and boosting its power. An entire afternoon passed before he had the ink for his pen.

The pen could hold a mere three drops of ink, but these three drops of liquid alone were worth over 10,000 gold of raw material. Besides, not just anyone could even produce it— that was limited to grand alchemists or runemasters. The time and labour involved would easily add another 50,000 to the price.

At that moment, the pale gold pen in Richard's hand turned transparent. The magical int could be seen sloshing around within, almost as if it had a life of its own.

Maple amber had a special characteristic in that it was quite

lively. Popular belief was that the gem was formed by the crystallisation of the blood of powerful ancient beings upon their death. This ingredient exponentially increased the magical properties of the runes it was used in, equal to roughly a single grade's increase. It was commonly used for grade 3 runes as well, sometimes even for grade 4. This was why maple amber was much more expensive than most other grade 2 ingredients.

Once the ink was prepared, it would only be effective for an hour. This was like the blood of some mythical creatures— outside of their body its use would drop quickly.

Richard didn't dare to dally, heading directly for Waterflower's room. Once she undressed, he had her stand straight and started with a dot on her knee. The line he drew was extremely long, extending all the way to her thigh and belly before going down the other leg all the way to her ankle. The second started from her stomach, crossing the first before moving up across her left breast to her shoulder. It split in two at the back of her neck, stretching to the back of her ears. The third line started from the stomach as well, going to her right breast, shoulder, and ending up at the middle finger of her right hand.

Just drawing these three lines left Richard drenched in sweat once more. The ink in the pen had almost run dry as well.

“Get some rest, we'll continue in an hour.”

Book 2, Chapter 79

Breath Of Darkness(2)

Waterflower may have had an hour to rest, but Richard did not. He busied himself preparing the inks for the next phase the moment he returned to his room. His pen pricked her knee once again after the hour passed, and time passed in silence.

By the time the rune was completed, another night had passed. The young lady's legs were completely covered with complex magical patterns, giving off a mysterious aura.

Richard stretched his weary body, looking at the rune he'd completed himself with a smile. "Move around and try it out; don't use Wind Walk."

The girl was a little puzzled, but she complied and leapt off the bed. Her speed picked up after a gentle landing, and she bolted towards a chair as quick as lightning. Without Wind Walk she was supposed to slow down and change directions to avoid the obstacle. However, this time something activated in her mind as the rune on her legs twinkled slightly. She automatically stepped over the chair, striding over it with ease. Her movements were fluid and natural despite her speed, and she showed no signs of slowing down at all.

The room was only so big. The frenzied dash at full speed brought her to the wall in an instant, but even then she kept going. She gracefully dashed up the opposing surface, keeping her momentum going as she even took several quick steps on the ceiling before jumping down to land in front of Richard.

It was only then that she showed a look of surprise, lowering her gaze to her legs. The radiance of the rune there was slowly fading.

She moved suddenly once more, erupting into a chaos of swift movement around the room as she constantly brushed past the

runemaster at the centre. It was as though she was a ghost, the obstacles in the room not slowing her down in the slightest. This speed was only slightly inferior to Wind Walk itself! Back in front of Richard again, the surprise in her eyes had transformed into amazement.

“This is Call of the Wild. It can allow you to move easily through most complex landscapes with a minimal loss in speed. It also enhances your acceleration, allowing you to keep your speed up even over sand, stones, or marshes. It also lets you move uphill faster than you used to.”

To the young lady who was adept at moving in forested areas, using darkness to land a single lethal blow, this enhancement to her mobility was a straight boost to her combat power.

“Thank... you...” Despite remaining expressionless, Waterflower finally managed to force the two words through her teeth.

Richard laughed in reply, “There’s no need to thank me, we’re two parts of a whole. Besides, this is only the first. There’s still four more to come. You’ll have to bear with me for the next two weeks.

“Alright, I’ll go get some rest. I haven’t slept properly for a few days in a row now.”

Four more runes?

Waterflower’s body jolted slightly, her lowered eyelids slightly trembling. Watching as Richard left the room, she clenched her teeth and began in the most unnatural and stiff manner, “Umm... Your injury... Does it hurt?”

Richard’s laughter ground to a halt, and he threw a glare the girl’s way. She grew uneasy, understanding that she’d said something wrong.

“This matter... Don’t ever mention it again!” Richard huffed angrily, slamming the door to leave the room. However, his gait

still didn't look natural.

Things rarely went according to one's wish. Even back at his room to rest, Richard didn't get any peace. The source of his distress was naturally Flowsand, the only one in his party with the right to enter and leave his room at will.

Flowsand stared intently at Richard as he was about to go sleep, "You don't look too good."

"I'm just tired," Richard replied casually.

"Nope, that's not it. You're injured?" Flowsand clearly wasn't that easy to dupe.

"No!" Richard's voice grew in pitch.

"Where's the injury?" she insisted, reaching out to undo his clothes, "Let me see."

"There's really no injury!" Richard grew furious.

"You can think of bluffing a cleric of the Eternal Dragon after you have ten more levels on you!" Flowsand shot back sharply. She absolutely wouldn't give in when it came to the matter of his injuries.

However, something else suddenly occurred to Flowsand. Richard hadn't headed out in the past few days, so how did he get injured? He was clearly crafting a rune for Waterflower all this while—

As his process came to mind, she blurted out without thinking, "How did you get injured? Did you not explain clearly what you were doing, so she instinctively retaliated..."

She stopped abruptly after bringing up the matter. Her unintentional words were infinitely close to the truth, and the memory of Waterflower's usual target instantly sealed her mouth shut. Her gaze towards Richard changed, as a smile curled up at the corner of her lips.

Richard grew livid, grabbing Flowsand and throwing her out. He then closed the door with a thud.

However, gentle and even knocking rang out only a moment later.

Richard begrudgingly opened the door, yelling, “WHAT DO YOU WANT?”

Sure enough, Flowsand was still at the door. Her smile made it seem like flowers were blooming everywhere, “I can treat minor injuries! I need to cast a lesser heal!”

Richard looked up at the ceiling for a bit, before gritting his teeth and dragging her into the room with a tug. He then slammed the door shut with a heavy thud.

.....

Ten hours later, Richard made his way over to Waterflower’s room in large strides, prepared to continue his runecrafting. The rest seemed to have a rather positive effect; at least Waterflower couldn’t spot anything amiss from the way he walked.

What followed were two more days without rest. An expanse of silver patterns was added to Waterflower’s chest and abdomen, covering her vital parts and enhancing the defence of her body. This was another custom rune from Richard, Truesilver Ornament. It would provide just as much protection as a suit of refined armour. Outside of that, this new rune also strengthened her magic resistance, especially towards nature magic.

Waterflower did not like to wear armour, her skills brought out to the fullest when she was clad in light clothing. Some advanced magic could track its target, while some other spells affected an entire area. The ability to resist magic was of utmost importance to her.

Resting for another ten hours, Richard then started on his third rune. This one was at her head, behind the ears. Two matchlessly

fine and elaborate runes decorated either side of her head, each only the size of a fingertip.

The Dark Sight rune had one simple function, affording Waterflower upto 30 metres of vision in the dark. Since the young lady could already see in the dark to some extent, her range went up to a total of 50 metres. As she advanced in levels, the range would continue to grow.

It had taken Richard about a day and a half to complete Dark Sight. He then rested once more, beginning the next rune when he was ready. This one would be drawn on her right forearm.

This rune was a dull, dark grey, looking like a bunch of curled-up petals. Passively it boosted Waterflower's ability to hide her breathing, and when she launched attacks it also imbued some properties of shadowforce into the attack. This was an additional boost to her power.

Shadow Seal... The inspiration for the rune had come from his near-death battle with the nightmare panther, thus the origin of the name.

Book 2, Chapter 80

Breath of Darkness(3)

Call of the Wild, Truesilver Ornament, Dark Sight, and finally Shadow Seal... These were all custom designs, and although they were only grade 1 they served to accent the user's abilities. They weren't normal runes that just enhanced a particular attribute. Technically, they would be classified as somewhere between grade 1 and grade 2, and moreover they had all been tailored to Waterflower's abilities. Not only had Richard considered her combat style and special abilities, he'd also optimised the positioning of each rune to fuse them together perfectly with her. Nobody else could make use of them as well as she could.

However, that was not the end. He drew an additional dark purple rune on her solar plexus, pouring out all of his inspiration.

Counterguard would form the heart of Waterflower's rune set. It was designed to increase her mental and spiritual defences, allowing her to more easily aid Richard in case of a soul attack. As the core of the set, it took him five days to craft it. Once done, all the magic patterns were ignited, the runes combining to form the complete set.

Once the runes joined, the set gained another ability: Breath of Darkness. When activated, Waterflower would perfectly meld into her surroundings, her attacks growing more lethal as the shadow damage of her attacks growing even more powerful. Once she activated this ability, she would truly become a nightmare for her opponents.

This was the first rune set he had ever crafted— the Breath of Darkness had been completed!

A short while later, he summoned Flowsand to Waterflower's room. Explaining everything from Call of the Wild to Counterguard, he followed up, "Once the five runes combine, a

new ability is formed. I've named the set after this, calling it the Breath of Darkness as well. This is only the start. The set was built to be extensible, developed and strengthened sometime in the future. The whole series will be called the Savagery of Darkness."

Having said that, he allowed Waterflower some time to change before summoning Gangdor to the backyard. The two would test out the Breath of Darkness in real combat.

It was still late at night. The messy courtyard was Waterflower's favourite kind of environment. However, the girl had placed a full set of knight's armour on a wooden rack nearby, not telling anyone what it was for.

Hearing he would be fighting Waterflower, Gangdor roared with delight. The axe in his hands began to tremble— ever since his powers had been enhanced with a rune he hadn't heartily engaged in combat. Moreover, both he and Waterflower were raised in the death training camp; they understood each other very well. In his heart, she was definitely one of his most dangerous opponents. With her recent advancement and the five tailor-made runes, how much more powerful had she become?

However, even if he was laughing boorishly, Gangdor had long since removed that 'one of' in his heart. She was definitely his greatest opponent!

The young lady was adorned in white, standing in front of him with a sense of majesty. She emitted an extremely unfamiliar aura in the night, as if she was only partly visible in the darkness. It made it difficult to grasp her position.

Out of habit, Gangdor let out a few hearty laughs. He rubbed his bald head and suddenly waved his axe, speaking seriously, "Waterflower! Let me say this in advance, you're not allowed to use that steel spike!"

A coarse and rusty spike appeared in the girl's hand, none the wiser as to where it had previously been hidden. The young girl

threw it out lazily, and with a boom the spike was embedded into the yard's wall. She then slowly drew the Shepherd of Eternal Rest, holding it with both hands. The blade was pointed at the floor and her heel was slightly raised as she stared at Gangdor with both eyes, her short hair lifting even in the absence of wind.

Gangdor put both hands on his own axe, growing silent. He bent both knees, bursting forth with a cold and imposing aura!

It was as though the aura pushed Waterflower's hair up. However, her figure did not float up alongside it, instead slowly disappearing into the darkness.

Before she could vanish completely, Gangdor let out a strange cry. He swung his axe horizontally, bringing it beside his body.

A soft ding rang out, the Shepherd of Eternal Rest quietly appearing from within the darkness to strike the big axe. Waterflower's silhouette appeared by Gangdor's side, but it grew fuzzy again before he could even see her clearly.

Ding! Ding! Gangdor swung twice behind him, barely managing to block Waterflower's next two blows. However, even before he could retrieve his axe her blade had appeared in front of him once more. This time, it was much faster!

Waterflower was as fast as lightning, scurrying between Gangdor's front and back as she rained a torrent of blows upon Gangdor. She used Wind Walk to completely suppress him with her movement, leaving him without time even to block her hits. All he could do was force all the power out of his runes, hoping the increased strength could let him spin his axe faster. His only hope at this point was to become a windmill, but whether that would protect him all depended on luck.

His heart suddenly felt an unspeakable chill, and Gangdor was stunned for a moment as the icy, beautiful face of Waterflower appeared clearly before his eyes. However, that clarity only existed for a fleeting moment before the young lady flew past him like the

wind, the Shepherd of Eternal Rest flashing in her hand.

Gangdor stood rooted in place, while Waterflower appeared a few metres away. She quietly stood tall despite being a little short of breath; her strength was almost completely used up, but the battle had long since come to a close.

Gangdor slowly turned around. Around two metres behind him was the set of full armour, in the same position Waterflower had originally placed it in. He'd thought she wanted to use the armour as an obstacle to give her an advantage in battle, but he realised now that it was not the case.

A slanted crack suddenly appeared on the armour, following which the bottom silently split off. The rest of the armour crashed down to the floor, the clamour extremely loud in the silent night. The hazy moonlight revealed a glimmering cut in the armour.

Gangdor's throat suddenly trembled violently. He swallowed down a wad of saliva, his complexion growing extraordinarily unbearable. Had Waterflower targeted him with the blow instead of that armour, he knew clearly that he would have met the same fate.

At that moment, the young lady had become the ultimate opponent.

By Richard's side, Flowsand suddenly let out a gentle sigh.

Richard paused for a while before asking, "What are you thinking about?"

The Breath of Darkness far surpassed even his own imagination. As long as it was in the night, Waterflower could even destroy Stormhammer at his peak with her current prowess!

Flowsand maintained her own dazzled expression for a while before speaking, "I was just thinking of a few hundred years ago, when runemaster Lugatti showed off the first-ever rune set. Ah, what a grand scene that must have been. That set was what

brought rune knights to the mainstream!”

Richard let out a faint smile, “My only concern now is whether or not you’ll resist me in the future.”

Flowsand threw a glance back at him, speaking firmly and with determination, “I won’t let you get it easily!”

Book 2, Chapter 81

An Endless War

Their last night in Camp Bloodstone.

It seemed quiet and peaceful, but in the inn things were far from being so. A loud bang sounded as Flowsand's lithe body was sent flying across Richard's bedroom, landing on his bed.

Richard's throw was calculated and meticulous. He'd used the bare minimum strength to send her the entire distance, not slamming her against the wall or otherwise hurting her. Nonetheless, the cleric was left crouching over the bed panting, apparently unable to get up. The robes covering her body were torn and tattered beyond recognition, exposing her snowy shoulders and almost half of her back in naked glory. The bottom half had been ripped to shreds, displaying her alluring thighs as her toes dug into the sheets.

Richard scoffed, seeing through her act. Of course he'd be gravely wrong to think she would let him have his way so easily. His previous experiences had taught him well, he wouldn't be fooled by her tricks this time around.

He took off his clothes without much hurry, showing off a perfect body that was beyond his age and occupation. He then slowly ambled to the side of the bed, asking, "Did I hurt you?"

Flowsand kept her face buried in the sheets, moaning softly in reply.

Richard took the chance to grab onto her ankle, tugging her towards him before peeling off the remainder of her clothes and getting into position. Just as he was about to start his enjoyment, her legs wrapped around his waist and pulled him in, causing their bodies to collapse against each other. Her legs were unusually strong, pulling their bodies into an intimate distance.

A ten centimetre change from their previous position quickly turned the tables, as the sly girl attacked his groin. Flowsand controlled her strength perfectly, causing great amounts of pain to the boy opposite her but without leaving any trauma or lasting injury. Nevertheless, it wasn't a good feeling for one's privates to be attacked.

Richard groaned internally, his head spinning with rage. Flowsand was still bursting with energy, supporting herself against the bed to flip him over in a split second before landing gracefully. This was definitely not the weak physique of a cleric.

Flowsand ran for the door the moment her feet touched the ground, obviously wanting to escape. However, her fingers barely grazed the doorknob before her body was yanked backwards.

"Thinking of running, huh," Richard said petulantly, dragging her back.

The pair entangled once again, becoming a mess that fell to the bed. Flowsand managed to wriggle out another time, but this time things weren't in her favour. She'd landed in front of one of the room's corners, and before she took the chance to run Richard had already cut her off.

Just as she'd said to him, she wouldn't let him have it so easily. It had been a while since this battle for dominance started, and the cleric had proved her melee skills over and over again. She practised something similar to wrestling, her strength and direction unpredictable. Her great agility and flexibility only served to elevate her technique to another level.

Richard had only learned later that the priestesses of the Church of the Eternal Dragon were trained in self defense just in case they were ambushed from behind. However, that training proved to be his biggest obstacle.

And yet, the more familiar he grew with her techniques the stronger and more targeted his counters were. This pushed

Flowsand into more of an unfavourable position every time. He'd almost gotten her in a few attempts, ripping her robes and garments apart to leave her with almost no defences.

The cleric was running out of stamina as the brawl continued. Richard was drenched in sweat himself, but that only hyped him up further. He was a man— the more fierce the resistance, the more excited he grew.

It was growing harder and harder for Flowsand to get herself out. Her struggles were finally put to an end as Richard held her down against the table. She twisted her body in an attempt to escape, but her strength was running out and she only managed to bounce up a little before being pushed back. He grabbed a hold of her hand and held it against her waist, before moving in.

Two screams rang out from the room at the same time. One was a man's bestial growl, while the other a woman's repeated pants of pain. Richard kept Flowsand stuck beneath him, only lifting the pressure once he thrust into her. He barely waited for her to catch a breath before going in once more, his movements rough and hard.

It seemed like Flowsand had finally reached her limits, bending over the table to bear the unending attack. The only thing she could do was let out soft moans here and there, her sweat soaking the wood.

Richard himself almost reached climax in a short while, likely because of the intense battle that served as a precursor to this. He took a deep breath and halted his movements; this wasn't an easy prize, he couldn't end up finishing so quickly.

However, Flowsand who looked drained of energy suddenly took the chance to move her body, attempting to wriggle her way out of his grasp. An inexplicable feeling filled Richard as he roared, "WHAT ARE YOU TRYING TO DO?" But then, he lost control of himself and released.

He then leaned over Flowsand's bare back, panting hard. The cleric lifted her head, caressing his face, "Nothing. I wanted to flee, but didn't get the chance."

Richard fumed at the thought. She was thinking of fleeing in this manner?

He stayed silent for a few more minutes before suddenly getting up, picking the priestess up and throwing her on the bed. He then got on top of her. It was now Flowsand's turn to be shocked; she hadn't expected him to recover so quickly. Their second battle was especially intense, lasting a long time.

According to Norland's military traditions, a raging first battle would be followed by a prolonged war. As for the third...

Richard, sweating buckets at this point, lay next to Flowsand and let out a snort. He then asked in high spirits, "Finally honest with your feelings this time?"

Flowsand laughed lightly, only answering with a vitality spell.

The third battle would be a counterattack. The formerly oppressed party would mount a comeback, switching their positions completely.

The night was still young when the third battle reached its end. The war had not concluded, especially with one party relentlessly provoking the other. The fourth battle inevitably began. This time, Richard gave it his all...

By the time the sun finally rose, Richard was completely worn out and drowsy. On the other hand, Flowsand was energetic as ever, exuding a radiance that made her look irrevocably beautiful in the light of dawn. She clung onto Richard without letting him sleep, intending to start a fifth battle.

"What are you thinking about?" Flowsand propped her chin onto Richard's chest and gazed at him expectantly. Her eyes were deep with meaning.

“I was just reminded of times when I was younger,” Richard replied weakly.

“When you were younger?” Flowsand was rather surprised at his answer, especially in a moment like this.

“Yeah, I was still in Rooseland back then with my mother. When I grew a little older, she let me help out with the herb farm. I watched the villagers farm as well.

“Rooseland was a mountain village. The farmers raised magical bulls to spare manpower. This just reminded me of those times.”

“What about it?” Flowsand grew even more curious, but she was sure that Richard was distracting her to avoid the fifth round.

Richard turned his head to look at Flowsand. He then flashed a vague smile, “I feel like I’m the bull and you’re the farm. From my experience, bulls died from exhaustion but the farms never spoiled.”

And once again, the only reply he was met with was a vitality spell. Of course, his departure from Camp Bloodstone was delayed yet again.

Book 2, Chapter 82

Oasis

Early morning two days later, Richard's troops left Camp Bloodstone. They made use of the cool morning air to hurry along to Bluewater Oasis, the closest Oasis to this edge of the Bloodstained Lands.

Their party now had more than ten horses, a few carriages, and thirty half-orc warriors. The extra ten had been given to Richard for his valiance in fighting on in terms of alcohol intake. It was also partly due to Flowsand's scrolls.

The unexpected experience with Stormhammer and the remaining half-orcs had changed Richard's views on these warriors. He'd originally planned to just treat them as cannon fodder, but now he would treat them as part of his core troops.

As for Sam and Mark's other subordinates, they were tasked to stay behind at Camp Bloodstone. Their duty was to manage the spring and all the other businesses nearby. The parting words Richard had left Big Axe with were quite cheerful, "I always place enormous trust in my subordinates."

Camp Bloodstone was roughly 80 kilometres away from Bluewater Oasis. However, this seemingly short journey was actually quite dangerous. Many caravans had used the oasis as a place to resupply and trade, and as the number of caravans heading there increased bandits and robbers were naturally attracted to the place. Many big-time slave traders also found suitable opportunities to join these rogues and murderers.

Richard's team was of moderate size. Although they had several carriages accompanying them, it was clear that these carriages held their own belongings and not goods for trade. The powerful robbery groups didn't think they were worth the effort.

On top of that, the team had two heavily armoured trolls, thirty orc warriors, and a dozen wind wolves following them. They seemed quite tribalistic. Most tribes believed in ancestral worship, and held deep-seated notions about vengeance. Make an enemy of one, and their relentless blood feud would last generations. As such, bandits who plied their trade in the Bloodstained Lands were often afraid of provoking orcs unless they were confident of destroying the entire tribe.

Even then, there were barely any benefits of doing so. Orcs were still primitive, without much material wealth. Most adults of the tribe were strong warriors, and destroying even the smaller tribe would require a lot of effort for little profit. Very few people were interested in such a lop-sided business model.

The bloodstone orcs were actually an exception. Saint warriors had appeared amongst their ranks in several generations, allowing them to maintain firm control of Camp Bloodstone which was a major crossroad. Even without any saints in Stormhammer's generation, the half-orc tribe had doubled in military strength since the last. What's more, the tribe was more open and orderly, not completely rejecting the influence of outsiders. That was why those like Bowen, Howie, and the like had any say in the camp. And it was precisely this openness that meant these 'outsiders' would help in case the camp faced an external threat.

More than half of the bloodstone tribe's accumulated wealth over the past century had entered Richard's hands, most of it poured into the Breath of Darkness on Waterflower. Richard himself was only left with enough materials to craft two more runes, and even those would have limited might.

Riding his warhorse, Richard squinted his eyes and closely inspected the stone forests and red earth of the Bloodstained Lands. The sun shone down brightly without obstruction, the air hot enough for the scenery to distort. This place was barren, yet many intelligent races survived here. In fact, they led very exciting

lives. Nobody was sure of what would happen tomorrow and as such everyone lived frantically, trying to accomplish many things at once. Bloodthirsty murder, sexual services, slave trade, even drugs... every conceivable crime could be found somewhere in this land.

The harshness of the environment gave the people here tremendous energy and unlimited freedom. Such was the beauty of the Bloodstained Lands— the place was completely free, and as such the weak grew worse and the strong continued to grow unrestricted.

Gazing at this blood red land, Richard felt a sudden faint inspiration. All of his inspiration for the Savagery of Darkness series, aimed at lethal ambushes, had been poured into creating the Breath of Darkness. However, looking at the crimson sand and how people struggled to survive here, new feelings started to stir within his mind. Perhaps he still needed an opportunity, but he might be able to start on a brand new series of runes. As of yet, however, he had no idea whether he really would be able to do so, and what that signified.

After the long, arduous battle with Flowsand that brought them both pain and joy, he'd gotten to know this favoured child of the Eternal Dragon a lot better. That understanding could give rise to another series of rune sets in the future. He was already at the point of capturing the essence of the first set, and he'd even thought of a name for it.

Assuming all other circumstance remained the same, Richard believed Mystic Glory would be a series not at all inferior to the Savagery of Darkness.

His mind occupied with such thoughts throughout the journey upto Bluewater Oasis, nothing eventful happened until they reached their destination.

Bluewater was called an oasis, but it was actually a large

freshwater lake that spanned a few hundred square kilometres. Underground springs had kept the place fed all these years, and it had never dried out. The humans and other similar races only occupied cities on the edge of the oasis. There were other creatures as well, with a large variety of unfathomable flora all around. There were likely many terrifying creatures swimming around in the depths of the clear blue water.

Bluewater Oasis was merely 200 kilometres away from the Sequoia Kingdom, which was only a few days of travel. As such, food and other necessities could be brought over by caravans from the human kingdoms. This proximity also made it one of the Bloodstained Lands' greatest hubs of slave trade.

As a result of the vast range of interests in controlling this place, no single party ruled over the entire oasis. The Sequoia Kingdom, slave traders, and even bigger bandit groups of the Bloodstained Lands had their own parts to play. After many years, they'd reached a delicate balance of power.

Located at the side of the lake was a big chaotic city that formed the core of Bluewater. This city had no walls, a result of all the power struggles that had unfolded in the past. It was ringed by camps both large and small, most foreign caravans setting up on the outskirts to conduct their business inside the city. A large number of slaves were held captive in specialised camps with high walls and heavy guards, the tight security visible from afar. Given the hundreds of such bases all around, it was easy to tell just how many slaves were traded regularly.

Richard's troop slowly passed these slave camps without attracting much attention. Dozens of parties of this size entered and left the city every day.

Book 2, Chapter 83

Tyrant

Richard had done his homework on Bluewater before arriving. He pitched camp on the outskirts of the city, instructing his subordinates to guard the camp before bringing a handful of men into the city. He was planning to sell a few more of his runes here, in exchange for the materials he needed. He also planned to start building his personal army further. His strength was pretty evident by now, he could easily take down a hundred-man bandit group if he wanted to, but he had his eyes on greater things.

It was already night when they entered the city. Richard booked the best rooms in the most renowned inn here, getting some dinner before he brought his men out to dig for information at a rather established bar.

It was still a little too early for the bar to be crowded. A middle-aged man was cleaning cups behind the bar counter, on the lean side with observant eyes that exuded an eerie, cold aura.

Richard scanned through everyone present upon entering, getting a rough idea of their powers and abilities. He then found a seat at the bar, while his subordinates found a large table and settled down. He took out a gold coin at the counter, sliding it across before saying to the bartender, "Give my men a glass each of your best liquor."

Snap! The bartender caught the coin instantly, proceeding to bring out a dozen cups before pouring a golden liquid into them. A strong scent of alcohol burst out, and the man snapped his finger to have a handful of scantily clad waitresses bring the drinks to their table.

There were two women in Richard's group, but they seemed to have no aversion to hard liquor as they downed it rather spontaneously, faster even than the surrounding men. Alcohol was

definitely one of the things the city of blood was known for.

Richard took his own glass and had a sip, exclaiming, “This is great!”

“But of course. You lot seem to be new here. The first order of every night is at half price, but there are no special discounts after,” the bartender informed him.

Richard smiled, “That’s fine by me. Here, a second glass for everyone.” He slid two more shining coins across the counter.

The bartender poured out the liquor skillfully, taking the chance when Richard was distracted to size the boy up.

It was then that Richard flipped out a small coin pouch, pushing it towards the man, “This is twenty gold coins, minted by the church. Tell me, what do you know of Red Cossack, and specifically Red Hook?”

“Red Cossack?” the bartender asked, weighing the pouch in his hand before proceeding to place it in his drawer. “Alright, wait a bit.”

He took out a bigger cup, selecting a half-full brown bottle from his shelf and pouring out half a cup of blood-red liquor. He then pushed the glass over to Richard and smiled sneakily, “Here’s your Red Cossack.”

Richard frowned as he gripped the glass tightly.

“Please make your payment now. That is 300 gold in total. Here’s the rule boy: no refunds once the drink is prepared.” The bartender crossed his arms, squinting at Richard as he laughed menacingly.

And yet, Richard was exceptionally indifferent, “You dare exploit me?”

The bartender glanced over with a look of derision, speaking in a patronising voice, “You’re just a little rascal, how dare you not pay

for what you've order? Bloody look around you, at the kind of place you're in! Black Devil!"

A few fierce men stood up from the corner, one of them nearly 2.5 metres tall; his head almost hit the lights on the ceiling when he stood up. The man was tanned, his upper body naked with a skull painted on his chest with some kind of white paint. Richard could feel some unusual energy radiating from the skull— it seemed like some tribal totem. This man was a level 10 warrior, and his physique made it obvious that he clearly had some other unique abilities as well.

The group walked over to the counter, and the bartender pointed coldly at Richard, "This rascal refuses to follow the rules, he actually wanted to buy information from me! He's also pretty rich."

The tanned man nodded his head as he cracked his fingers loudly, "Leave all your money, you bastard, and your right hand too. And take your men and piss off! I'll make sure you leave all your limbs behind if you dare refuse!"

"You want my right hand?" Richard smiled icily.

"Don't bargain with me! Now, I want both of your hands!" Black Devil growled.

Richard was still swirling the liquid in his cup, causing the blood-red liquor to spin quickly. His gaze was fixed on the glass in his hand throughout their conversation, and he didn't even spare a glance at either the bartender or Black Devil. When he spoke up again, his tone was nonchalant, "Which rotten bastard amongst you thinks I'm just a pushover?"

Black Devil raged and growled, "Don't even think of leaving now! You won't even be able to crawl after I'm done with you!" His threatening fist came fast the moment his sentence came to an end.

Richard was looking at the crimson liquid, seemingly unaware of what was going to happen to him even if his hair flew with the wind created by the fist.

Just as the fist was half a metre from Richard's face, it stopped in mid-air. A pincer-like hand grabbed a hold of his wrist, so powerful that Black Devil couldn't move anymore. Gangdor had appeared out of nowhere, stopping the man's punch. He was much smaller than his opponent, but the murderous aura he exuded was tenfold that of his opponent. Black Devil certainly had killed a fair number of people, but how could he compare to the blood and gore of the Archeron death camps?

The fellow's biceps looked ready to explode, his face reddening from all the strength he exerted. But no matter how hard he tried, he was unable to move forward. Gangdor was like a statue of steel, simply unmovable!

Gangdor stuck his tongue out at the man in front of him, revealing his pearly white teeth. At the same time his own muscles started to move, two distinct auras bursting forth from his body to wrench a dreadful scream out of Black Devil's mouth. The latter cringed with the pain, cracks sounding from the hand Gangdor held. His fist was pulled up without his control, twisting in an unnatural angle. Finally he couldn't tolerate the pain any longer, screaming as he fell to the ground.

Gangdor smiled at the sight, increasing the force he exerted to completely shatter his target's bones.

All this while, the bartender's cocky expression faded into surprise and astonishment. He screeched when he saw Black Devil fall, "Slaughter them! ALL OF THEM!"

The rest of the men charged towards Richard and his team, bringing out metal rods and machetes. One of them even tried to go for Richard's head; if he succeeded, he would split the mage in half.

The city of blood lived up to its name; any ordinary fight could end in death.

Book 2, Chapter 84

Interrogation(1)

Richard's face was colder than ever as he took out the remnant page of the Book of Holding and unfolded it. A faint yellow radiance erupted from the page, filling half the bar. Anyone caught in the light was slowed down by at least 30%.

This was a grade 5 spell, Mass Slow. Richard had adjusted the reserve spell from an offensive to supporting one, since the main goal of this visit was a transaction and not a fight.

The result matched expectations. Not only did the few large fellows slow down, the other patrons in the bar were affected as well. It was apparent that there was nobody outside of Richard's men here who could resist grade 5 magic.

Richard himself completely ignored the machete right above his head. He had faith in Gangdor, who'd activated both Gaia's Force and the strength rune. The brute let loose a punch on the attacker's face, and the sound of bones cracking echoed as the man flew across the bar, knocking down a few tables in the process before landing on the floor. He twitched uncontrollably on the ground, unable to get up.

He then grabbed a bottle nearby, slamming it into Black Devil's head. The battle was far tougher than average, but Gangdor was far stronger than an ordinary human. Black Devil swayed a little before falling, and Gangdor took the chance to step on his left arm. Pressure gathered at his boots, and bone-shattering sounds rang out once more. The shriek this time drowned out all other noises in the bar.

But nobody could care less about him right now. Olar had already drawn his dagger, infiltrating the chaotic crowd and taking out two of the burly men like an assassin. This gave him a metal rod, which he used to strike another fellow. Although the danger of this

rod wasn't as great as that of his dagger, the loud collision and the splatter of blood from the action were far more rousing. The elven bard had put his full strength into that strike, so much so that his expression was oddly twisted. This was the first time anyone had seen his dark side.

The fellow obviously wasn't satisfied with one hit, as he proceeded to pound into his opponent until all that was left of the body was a big, gory mess.

Nonetheless, Waterflower interrupted his berserk act.

A cold "Move!" caused the bard to quiver a little, growing clear-headed as he instantly moved backwards. The girl swept past the elf at the speed of lightning, and all their opponents were frozen mid-action as if someone had cast a grade 9 Time Stop on them. Suddenly, half a dozen heads flew into the air, blood splattering down like rain.

Nobody had managed to see the young lady's moves throughout this time, the Shepherd of Eternal Rest already pointed at another table of patrons in a split second. These people had all managed to struggle their way to stand despite the slowing spell, and most had a weapon or glass bottle in their hands. They were evidently planning to join the fight, but they hadn't been given the chance.

Just like the last batch, their heads would be sent flying the moment Waterflower stepped forth.

"Don't," Richard said from afar, and Waterflower stopped in her tracks.

Richard scanned the bar. One of the knights he'd brought along had already taken out two opponents, aiming for their joints. Both had lost mobility almost immediately, and they were definitely crippled for the rest of their lives. There were still a dozen-odd patrons left in the bar, most looking like they were about to engage. However, a handful were trying to escape the bloody battle. They'd seen that the situation was unfavourable, and were

probably planning to inform others and gather more manpower.

Seeing this, he ordered, “Cut off the right leg of anyone trying to flee.”

Before he could complete the sentence, Waterflower had finished a circle around the bar. The right legs of all who were planning to escape fell off their bodies the moment they took a step. They were all caught off-guard, slamming into the ground. It was only then that their brains caught up to the excruciating pain, turning them into howling beasts. The girl had already charged towards the rest of the enemies who were picking up weapons without Richard’s instructions.

Both the vision and skill of the girl were exceptional. Limbs flew out everywhere in the bar, left and right arms all holding onto weapons. The most unlucky of them all was a big man who’d held an enormous axe with both hands.

Effortlessly finishing her task, Waterflower returned to her seat and sat down in peace. The Shepherd of Eternal Rest was back in its sheath; this blade of massacre would never be stained by the blood it drew.

The girl was too fast for Richard to even stop or change things. The men in this bar were mostly around levels 7 and 8, ants in front of this teenager who had the Breath of Darkness.

Richard shook his head. To everyone’s surprise, he violently hurled the glass in his hand across the bar. The glass which could hold a litre of liquor screeched across the air, slamming into the face of the bartender who’d tried to run. The impact had broken the tough glass into countless fragments, leaving crimson fluid running down his face like a waterfall. It was impossible at this point to tell what was blood and what was liquor.

Richard then jumped over the counter, grabbing the man by his hair and towing him back. The lack of his target’s resistance shocked him— the person who’d started this bloody mess was

actually an ordinary human.

The bartender shrieked in a high voice, “I’m a subordinate of the Two-Headed Dragon, Schitich! If you dare touch me, you’ll be dead before you know it! Master Schitich will catch all of you and mince you up before feeding you to his dog! The two girls will live longer, but there’ll be hundreds of men lining up to fuck you everyday!”

“What a trash-talker. It’s no wonder that you’re only a bartender.” Richard lifted the bartender and pressed him against the bar counter. He then pulled his left arm up against the bar counter and made Gangdor hold it down it.

The bartender’s shrieks intensified as he realised things weren’t as expected. He struggled for his life, repeating, “Master Schitich has the best cavalry! Let me go now and I’ll forget whatever happened today! Or else, Master Schitich will wipe your whole family out!”

Richard sat back down at the counter, laughing at the bartender’s ridiculous words, “I’d like to thank this so-called Schitich guy if he managed to find my family. Now, tell me everything you know about Red Cossack. Be detailed, and don’t you dare lie.”

The fight in the bar has died down, leaving a mountain of corpses and casualties in its wake. A river of blood flowed out, with only a few left standing. Most of them were the waitresses, and others who were smart enough to respond correctly. They’d been fast to abandon their weapons, squatting down without trying to run. That was the only reason Waterflower’s blade did not strike them.

Richard did not make any threats, but the pressure on that left hand served as enough of a deterrent. The bartender finally trembled, struggling to make his last warning, “Master Schitich will never let you off...”

“I think it’s better to worry about your own fingers first.” Richard snapped his fingers, “Olar!”

Book 2, Chapter 85

Interrogation

“Hold on, Master!” The elven bard drew his dagger, suddenly lifting a waitress up by her long hair. He lightly slapped her smudged face with the flat side of his blade, and just as she forced a smile he abruptly cut her hands off.

The woman screeched in pain, and even Richard was rather distressed by this action. “What are you doing?” he questioned in a threatening tone, “You need to cut this man’s fingers, not her hands!”

The elven bard kept the woman suspended by her hair, turning her to face Richard. He shook her twice, causing an exquisite small scroll to fall out from her clothes. He grabbed it just before it fell into the puddle of blood on the ground, hurling it towards Richards. Richard realised the moment he pulled the scroll open that it would send out an alarm when torn apart.

This was a little trick of the higher classes, somewhat like a magical toy. It was rather effective in this case, however; he would never have expected a random waitress to have it on hand. She was beyond what she seemed.

“Master, this woman was trying to give you away. If those who try to flee deserve to have their legs cut off, then those who try to spread information deserve to lose their hands,” Olar said with resolution.

“Put her aside for now,” Richard replied coldly, “Come here and do your job!” The bard was intelligent, and the slave contract ensured his loyalty. He was just growing more and more unlikeable as his true nature revealed itself, but he was still someone who couldn’t be let go.

Olar wiped his dagger clean, glancing at the bartender

indifferently before asking, “Should I take my time, Master, or should I finish it fast?”

“I want you to make him spill.”

Gangdor had already replaced Richard to hold the bartender down, so he took his time to look through the bar’s shelf and picked something good for himself. He poured himself a fair bit of alcohol before leaning against the counter, waiting for a result.

Olar looked at the bartender’s fingers and said to Gangdor, “Lend me your axe.”

“What for?”

The bard rolled his eyes, “Because the blade is rough enough!”

Gangdor was delighted by the answer, passing the axe over, “Careful with it, it’s heavy!”

The elf snorted, grabbing the axe rather effortlessly. Bard though he may be, he was still level 9. He may not be able to use the axe in battle, but lifting it was no big deal. However, he soon realised that lifting and using the axe were two different matters. Cutting off one of the bartender’s fingers would prove to be a huge challenge. He needed to torture the fellow slowly, slicing his fingers up instead of chopping them all off at the same time.

Thus, it was only expected for him to miss with his first strike. The axe landed slightly off target, and had little strength behind it. Nevertheless, the weight of the axe alone crushed the first joint of the fellow’s finger into a bloody mess.

The bartender cried aloud, the pain so excruciating that his scream escaped Gangdor’s hand on his mouth.

The elf’s forehead was beading with sweat, and he looked rather tired as he tried to use the axe again. He shouted unhappily, “SHUT YOUR TRAP! I can still cut this finger three more times, leave whatever you have to say until after I’m done. Nobody cares right now!”

“I yield! I yield! I’ll tell you everything!” The bartender gave in under the pain and pressure. He’d just recognised the truth— these people before him definitely did not pale in front of Schitich or Red Cossack in terms of their cruelty. Knowing that the axe in the elf’s hands might fall again any time soon, he spilled everything he knew.

Red Cossack was a well-known slave trade group in this city of blood, so they naturally had slave camps in Bluewater. There were many camps spread out, and they could handle 30,000 slaves at once. Normally, they detained several thousands of slaves there.

The place had a team of 300 guards to guard these slaves, true elites unlike Red Hook’s knights. Even so, this wasn’t Red Cossack’s base; that was at Moon Bay, over a hundred kilometres away.

As for Schitich, he was considered a significant force in Bluewater Oasis. He had a force of 200 cavalry and 400 infantry, tasked with maintaining law and order in Bluewater alongside five other factions. The six organisations were mostly just mercenary groups that moonlighted as bandits. They were considered a single party, having two votes total in the Bluewater Council. The representative of the Sequoia Kingdom had 3, Marquess Anrick had 1, while the remaining 10 were with various slaving organisations which changed rather frequently.

The Bluewater Council had a certain level of authority. After all, one needed a stable environment for trade to thrive. However, when things involved specific benefits and interests it wasn’t unusual for things to be settled outside of its control.

Schitich himself was level 14, with a dozen of his subordinates being level 12 or above. However, he wasn’t close to the strongest in the oasis. That was the representative of Marquess Anrick, sword saint Rolf. His level 16 strength was the sole reason the Marquess even had a vote in the council.

The doors to the bar suddenly flew open at that point, and a few drunkards came in. The bloody mess and the noise in the bar seemed to sober them up a little, however, and they grew completely clear-headed when they noticed the icy stares of Richard's men. They quickly bowed apologetically. "Sorry, wrong place!" they shouted out, before running out at the speed of lightning without forgetting to close the door.

Richard raised his glass and had a sip before throwing it aside, "We're done here. Prepare for the next battle."

His subordinates got up, but Olar still had the bartender in hand, "What about this one?"

"Let him go," Richard waved dismissively and walked out of the bar.

The bartender hit the floor the moment the elf released him, looking like he would faint at any moment. However, there was a fiery hatred in his eyes as he watched Richard exit. Almost everyone followed after Richard, even Flowsand who hadn't made a move till then. However, he felt rather strange, as if something was missing or wrong.

It was then that it dawned on him that the beautiful, diabolical elf wasn't there. He turned around, only to see the glimmer of the elf's blade blinding his eyes.

Another head flew up in the air, and Olar shrugged indifferently at the headless body that was spewing blood, "Sorry, I'm sure Master wouldn't have liked the way you looked at him just now."

Book 2, Chapter 86

Free Horses

Even though the bar wasn't at the centre of the city, it wasn't far from it. The place was also rather big, and a significant amount of time had lapsed since the massacre. Despite it being sudden, it was enough to incite a forceful reaction.

Once he walked out of the bar, Richard took in a deep breath of the cool and refreshing night breeze. He dusted his clothes, but wasn't in any hurry to leave.

The convenience store next door was still open, the shopkeeper sitting on a bench that was half in the shop and half out. He smiled mysteriously at Richard, "Youngsters these days are so rash. You killed so many of Schitich's people the moment you came to Bluewater, he definitely won't let you off easily."

Richard's men were leaving the bar one after the other, but he still showed no intention of leaving. He replied with a smile, "I'm not being rash. I don't like being blackmailed, and hate having to spare lives even more. This isn't a small grievance."

"It isn't big either, at least around here."

"Perhaps. If so, then let me make it a bigger issue."

The old shopkeeper sighed, "Young people are always teeming with confidence. Being a troublemaker isn't a good trait."

Richard retrieved an immaculate white handkerchief, starting to clean his hands which had been stained with alcohol during the battle. He smiled deeply, "I really don't like trouble, but if anyone comes looking for some then they'll find they got a lot."

The old shopkeeper shook his head, "You're definitely an outsider."

"Bluewater is a huge lake. What Schitich controls is basically a

small cup. Besides, outsiders aren't the easiest to bully. They're the ones who have to live here, it's useful to have eyes that aren't blind," Richard replied without enthusiasm.

"Fine. Since you've killed almost all of Schitich's men in the bar, why aren't you leaving?"

Richard flashed a mysterious smile, "I'm waiting for some horses to be sent to me."

Just as he finished speaking, the faint sound of hooves could be heard approaching from the distance. A cavalry troop turned a corner just a hundred metres away, heading rapidly for the bar. There were more than twenty of them, their horses swift and forceful. It was evident that they had great control; even though the streets were bustling with life in the night, they managed to avoid hurting anyone. They had excellent horsemanship, and they also exercised restraint.

There were many different powers in Bluewater Oasis. Outside of the slave traders, there weren't many big groups. The slave traders themselves were split into four, and it was likely because of the abundance of other influences that these knights were acting so cautiously.

By the time they covered the short distance, Richard could tell that their leader was level 12 while the others were level 7 or 8. This fellow had to be one of Schitich's leading subordinates who happened to be nearby, rushing over immediately when he heard of the attack.

Richard was unperturbed, stowing the handkerchief away, "Here they are."

The knight spotted Richard's group from tens of metres away, egging his horse on as he sped towards them. The party was quite eye-catching in the Bloodstained Lands— a freely roaming purebred elf would attract attention no matter where they were. The mostly elven Olar didn't look much different under the

moonlight.

“Who dares stir up trouble in the Two-Headed Dragon’s bar?” the knight roared loudly from afar. Six idle people immediately raised their hands in response, pointing to Richard at the same time. He thus charged forth without hesitation, twirling his morningstar to a terrifying tune.

Richard started chanting a spell, but the speed at which the knights were sprinting left him with only two minutes to cast it. Just as the knights were about twenty metres away, Waterflower stepped forward. Her eyes were glowing with a faint radiance, her short hair flying about wildly. She suddenly howled like a wolf.

The horses on the frontline were immediately shocked, unintentionally flinging their riders off and sending them careening towards the ground. They seemed to lose all sanity, flailing, kicking, and biting aimlessly as they rushed around like they were blind. Their sole intention was to find an escape route, to get as far away from that young girl as possible. As far as they were aware, it wasn’t a beautiful young lady in front of them but instead a powerful demonic wolf that could tear them to shreds at any time.

The leader’s horse was the same as the rest, but he was clearly more skilled than his subordinates. He clamped down with his thighs, ensuring that he wasn’t flung off his mount. However, the sudden loss of balance left his morningstar flying out of his hand, leaving a gaping hole in a nearby building.

Even though he managed to control his horse, the soldiers behind him could not react fast enough. They continued charging forward at full speed, crashing into the berserk horses in front of them. It was a complete disaster. The leader eventually succumbed to his fate as well— no matter how good he was at controlling his horse, two people had crashed into him. His control didn’t exceed the fear its companions were radiating, and it eventually tumbled to the ground.

In the midst of all this chaos, Richard finally completed his spell. It was another mass slow, shrouding the majority of the knights and three of those who provided directions.

Gangdor, Waterflower, and two other members of the party rushed out immediately, three arrows flying past from behind them to hit three of the opponents and causing them to collapse. The leader struggled to get up from the ground, one of his legs trapped under the mess of fallen horses. He suddenly saw Gangdor flying towards him with axe in hand, slashing swiftly and maliciously. He gasped in horror, but was too slow to dodge the attack. His only option was to try and use the chain of another morningstar to try and block the attack.

A malicious shadow flashed across Gangdor's face, and pale yellow light radiated from his body. The eruption rune lit up from under his shirt, the strength amplification alongside Gaia's Force causing the huge axe to generate a strong wind like a drizzle transforming into a thunderstorm. Stunned by what was happening, the old shopkeeper who was originally sitting calmly opened his eyes wide in shock.

The strength of the brute's axe was unrivalled, mercilessly cutting through the chain. It then cut into the knight's suit of armour, eventually taking off his head. The leader's head flew up in the air, but his body still remained in a seated position, refusing to give in and crumble.

With their leader beheaded on the spot, the remaining knights who were still stuck in the chaos were no match for the bunch of demons facing them. They were beheaded efficiently one by one. Seventeen or eighteen of the twenty-odd horses were still usable as well, giving each member of the party two horses.

Richard watched leisurely as his subordinates cleaned the place like professionals, gathering the horses and conveniently punishing one of the fellows who'd pointed them out. Of course, the punishment was cutting off all his limbs.

There were six people who'd directed the knights, but only one of them was this unlucky. The fool had tried to be funny after the situation had more or less settled, whipping out a dagger he had hidden in his sleeves.

Such obstinate opponents were bound to give them a headache, which was why Richard's men explicitly dealt with them. There were only two ways to deal with these people: either have them killed, or strip them of all fighting ability such as by taking their limbs.

Generally speaking, some of Richard's team were inclined towards the latter option. Although killing the person would have instant results, crippling them left their enemy with an unshirkable burden. Of course, this wasn't as good of a method in the Bloodstained Lands.

Book 2, Chapter 87

Two-Headed Dragon

The old man watched on as Richard's men took care of the rat. It was only when all the horses were prepared and Richard was about to leave that he sighed, "Young man, what purpose do you have in coming to Bluewater Oasis?"

Richard smiled elegantly, "Business. I hope to strike it rich."

"That's great!" the old man nodded, "There's plenty of opportunities to make money here."

"I hope so, but right now I have to leave this place. Before I can start my business, there are some issues I need to take care of." Richard gave the man a mage's bow, mounting his horse and vanishing into the night with his party.

Once they left the city, Richard and the rest made a beeline for their camp. The moment they entered, Richard saw a group of half-orcs eating and making merry around a bonfire. He kicked them up and roared, "All of you, up. NOW! Go don your armour and get your weapons, I want to see everyone ready for battle in ten minutes! We have a fight coming!"

Medium Rare responded from inside a tent. He walked out with a huge ladle in hand, the aroma of meat assaulting one's nostrils. He swung the thing around eagerly, asking, "Boss, what kind of battle is it? Will we need to run around, or are we going to defend?"

Richard swiftly walked to his side, poking the troll's fat belly, "Go, wear your thickest armour. Get a large hammer and tower shield ready, we'll be standing ground!"

A look of delight flooded the troll's face, and he beat his chest hard, "Don't worry, boss! I'll smash them like patties!" He hated fights that needed him to move. His armour weighed a few hundred kilograms, and even with his strength that was enough to

compromise his speed. On the other hand, when he was just standing ground the combination of his heavy armour, buffing magic, and war songs was enough to break formations entirely by himself.

“Prepare yourselves, we’ll be facing a cavalry troop. The leader will most likely be level 12, but there’s also a chance that he’ll be level 14. There will be a hundred of them.

“You lot! Go to the woodpile and sharpen the stakes. Bury them in the ground, sharp end facing out with no more than a metre and a half exposed. I want a stake every five metres!” Richard walked through the entire camp, rallying the troops one by one. He also gave them instructions and orders.

The camp entered a frenzy, but in the short period of time a couple hundred stakes had been placed all over the side of the camp that faced the city. These stakes were designed to hold off cavalry. Richard’s soldiers were quite experienced, so they hadn’t sat down doing nothing when they got to camp. They organised troops to go into the nearby forests, gathering wood to bring it back to camp. A small portion was to be used as fuel, while the rest was cut up and placed to make a fence at some point. There wasn’t enough time to do that anymore, so they instead used them as a line of obstacles.

The stakes weren’t everywhere. Even a soldier with mediocre skill could maneuver his horse past them without getting hurt, but if he tried to rely on the speed of his horse to try and ram through the stakes it would be impossible.

Richard had ten knights, all level 10. These fellows were the real deal, able to fight both on foot and on horseback. Although there were only ten of them, they were formidable. They were divided into two groups to guard opposite sides of the camp, with a wind wolf in each.

The remaining wind wolves were dispatched alongside the half-

orc warriors, every team consisting of five orcs and one wolf. The orcs were to follow the wind wolf and attack the designated target. This allowed Richard to minimise the number of direct orders he gave out, only needing to control the wind wolves with his mind.

A short while later, the ground started to tremble as neighs and warcries rang out from the direction of the city. The camps within a kilometre were alerted, their guards quickly clutching their weapons as they nervously stared in the direction of the city. A few of the clever ones lit torches under their banners, preventing any friendly fire under the dark night sky. The stronger camps weren't nervous, but they strengthened their guard anyway.

A fierce cavalry rushed out of the city, following the trail left behind by Richard's group as they hurried towards the camp. There were obviously a few good scouts in their midst.

There were more than eighty soldiers in the troop. Their leader was tall and strong, riding a black warhorse that looked to have demonic heritage. This was one of the authorities of Bluewater Oasis—the Two-Headed Dragon, Schitich.

This was less than half of Schitich's total army, it seemed like he hadn't been able to gather as many men in such a short notice. His lair may have been in the city, but that did not mean all his forces were concentrated there.

A 200-man troop in dragon formation could also be seen moving over from the city. This was Schitich's infantry, but given the several kilometres of distance of the camp from the city the battle would likely have ended before they even got here.

This was exactly what Richard wanted, eroding his opponents' power over several waves of battle. He knew that it would be difficult to gather a full army in such short notice.

Richard did not have the lights in the camp put out. Even if vision wasn't ideal, the oncoming army could easily see the stakes that had been prepared for them. Although the core of his own

party wasn't afraid of a battle in the night, a large number of the human and orc warriors did not have this capability. Richard didn't hope for these stakes to cause much damage, only having them placed to stop the enemy from charging them down.

Seeing the obstacles at the front of the camp and having learnt a lesson from the team that got destroyed at the bar, Schitich was in no hurry for his soldiers to rush forward. He instead reined his horse in, stopping in front of the stakes and raising his right hand. His troops started adjusting formation, coming up to a neat horizontal line behind him.

Schitich cast a gloomy glare at Richard who was at the centre of the field, crying out coldly, "Kid, tell me where you're from! If your father is rich enough you can surrender without any resistance. I'll only chop off an arm and a leg and let your father ransom you back!"

Richard laughed, pointing at Schitich's face with contempt, "You're a nobody, why would I be afraid of you? Forget my family, look at my age and status as a mage. Use your brain, do you think my teacher will forgive you if you mess with me? Don't assume the Bloodstained Lands are any big deal!"

The man's expression warped. Richard was not wrong; any mage capable of casting grade 5 spells at such an age would be a notable force in any large empire. Richard's teacher had to be a grand mage at minimum, and could very well be a key person in the mainland. This troop seemed unusually strong as well.

Even if a grand mage couldn't personally sweep through the Bloodstained Lands, a mage's position and capabilities did not rely solely on their personal power. With their heavy control over the trade of magical equipment, a grand mage would be perfectly capable of offering a high reward to topple him from his position in the Bloodstained Lands.

Even 10,000 gold was nothing to a mage. However, as far as

Schitich was concerned that was enough to have him fight for his life. Besides, whoever killed him would also obtain the favour of a grand mage.

Book 2, Chapter 88

Two-Headed Dragon(2)

Schitich's complexion changed, and some turmoil broke out amongst his troops as well. Bluewater wasn't too far away from human kingdoms, which was why there was a representative from the Sequoia Kingdom and Marquess Anrick here. Nobody would be willing to provoke a grand mage without reason; that almost always ended with death.

Just as Schitich started to hesitate, Richard made his own offer, "Afraid, are we? Then leave your hands and all your horses and scram!"

Schitich's expression fluctuated several times, before he ended up with a sardonic smile, "You're just a child, but you dare threaten me? I don't care who your teacher is, I'm killing you today! Once you die, you don't need to worry about how big the Bloodstained Lands are. Kill him!"

The soldiers at the wings charged out with Schitich's bellow, twenty on each side rushing for Richard's own wings. Schitich led the remaining forty through the obstacles at moderate speed, before dashing towards them.

Schitich was an axeman as well. His jet-black weapon was enormous, shining with light as he brandished it. Evidently, it was a piece of powerful magic equipment. He rode straight for Richard.

Waterflower appeared behind Richard once more, letting out another wolf-like howl. Dozens of the warhorses behind Schitich were startled, leaving more than half the riders thrown off. However, all five of the level 12 captains managed to keep their horses in control, and Schitich's own horse wasn't affected by the girl at all. He pressed on, dashing straight towards Richard.

Medium Rare roared as he charged out from the side, ramming

straight into an incoming horse. He actually sent both the horse and its rider flying, following which he smashed his heavy hammer into another nearby causing its entire chest to nearly cave in. The horse let out a long and painful neigh before plunging head-first to the ground. With it battered and hurt, the captain riding it had to leap off as quickly as he could, nearly falling in the process.

Dressed in his heavy armour, the troll roared thunderously. Although the hammers in his hand seemed to be swung chaotically, every strike was actually calculated. He only smashed the horses and never the riders. One of the captains had a lapse in judgement, unable to deflect the weapon in time causing him to fall from his horse. Another of the captains bellowed with rage, ruthlessly smashing a morningstar into the troll's armour, but Medium Rare only laughed maliciously as his hammer struck the man's horse.

Two heavy thuds sounded out on the battlefield, seemingly at the same time. These strikes could not be ignored, even by the troll with all his armour. Medium Rare roared in anguish as he staggered back a few steps, but on the other side the warhorse buckled in the face of the blow, flinging its rider far into the distance. The captain fell to the ground with a loud thud, too extended in his attack to protect himself. The fall itself resulted in severe injuries.

On the other hand, divine light poured over the troll's body. The greater heal, barrier, and blessing spells excited the troll once more, and he howled loudly as he wildly swung out once more. He pounced at the last mounted captain, attacking relentlessly. Once again, blood for blood, he managed to knock the man off his mount.

While a few of the captains who'd fallen off their horses were still groaning in pain, another greater heal landed on the troll's body, making him lively and vigorous once more. In an instant he'd

forced all the captains off their mounts. Although these level 12 leaders were comparable to Richard's knights, they were all suited in heavy armour for mounted battle. Once they fell, their might dropped with them.

When he'd first entered this plane, Medium Rare was already capable of fighting knights. Now he was suited in armour, with divine spells, buffing magic, and Olar's warsong supporting him. Any of the captains who attempted to fight the troll would be smashed in an instant, sent flying.

At the frontlines, Schitich's axe didn't even graze the top of Richard's head before it was blocked mid-air by the shaft of another.

The collision was fierce. Both these warriors focused on strength — one was high-levelled and had the support of a magical horse, while the other was born with innate strength, Gaia's Force, and an Eruption rune. The fight was surprisingly even.

Schitich's magic horse was stopped in its charge, whinnying with all its might as it staggered backwards. Its hind legs went weak before it fell to the ground. Gangdor didn't have it easy either. He spewed a mouthful of blood, flying backwards and falling down hard.

Although their powers were evenly matched, the weapons definitely were not. A gaping crack was formed in Gangdor's axe, and it most definitely would break with just one more clash. Schitich laughed like a maniac, a stream of blood flowing from his mouth as he waved his axe once more. However, a divine radiance shone in front of him at that moment. This was a greater heal!

Gangdor jumped back on his feet, grinning as he brandished his axe. The healing would take time to act, but with it acting on his body he had no need to fear this opponent. Besides, even injured Gangdor's aura actually grew in power. He actually advanced in level in the midst of this fierce battle!

They had a cleric! The mere presence of Flowsand put Richard's team on another level completely!

Schitich's expression changed drastically. He sent Gangdor flying once more, scanning the area around Richard to try and find the cleric. In Faelor, clerics and mages were targets that had to be killed at first sight.

However, right at that moment he felt an indescribable danger. He abruptly turned back, catching Richard pointing at him as a wave of mana invaded his body.

The strength of this spell was very weak, so weak in fact it was almost negligible. He realised that his surroundings had grown bright, looking up to see a ball of magic light floating a metre above his head. The ball illuminated everything in a ten-metre radius.

Illumination wasn't even a grade 1 spell, but it made Schitich the most striking target in the battlefield. All of a sudden, a tall tent in the camp opened up. A tall warrior dressed in black armour and armed with a two-handed sword walked out in large strides, cold air spurting out of the cracks in his helmet. The deep footprints left behind with every step he took showed how heavy this armour was, and the warrior's aura was no less imposing than that of heavy cavalry.

The warrior of darkness took large strides towards Schitich the moment he appeared, his longsword leaving a deep line in the ground as he dragged it along. Haste and stone skin spells fell on him one after the other as he ran, faint light starting to shine from beneath his helmet. Olar's warsong started to take effect as well.

Schitich could feel his hair stand. This black warrior chilled him down to the bone, and it was not due to a difference in strength. The man's entire aura seemed eerie, making him very uncomfortable. However, he didn't have the time to discern the source of this discomfort. Holding tightly onto his axe, he prepared

to fight hand to hand once more. The sheer number of spells on this warrior would increase his prowess by more than a level.

Book 2, Chapter 89

Two-Headed Dragon(3)

A loud bang resounded in the battlefield as the axe crashed into the warrior's enormous sword. Schitich's horse was finally left unable to withstand the impact, collapsing to the ground. The man immediately jumped off, wielding his enormous axe as he fought the warrior of darkness.

The warrior was strong, but he wasn't very agile. Schitich managed to retain the absolute advantage, but then Gangdor started to attack him from behind as well. He was locked into a struggle with the two, but Richard's knights joined in as well. Tiramisu also cast a slowing spell on him as he ran past.

Richard didn't rush to attack himself, instead constantly issuing commands as he stayed aware of the situation on the battlefield. He suddenly realised the time was ripe, shouting, "Knights, retreat!"

The knights on both wings immediately moved back, retreating to the camp.

"Orcs, retreat!" The half-orc warriors also began to fall back, moving behind the line formed by the knights.

"Zendrall. 30 metres ahead and to the left, Strengthen Fear!" Five seconds after the command, a group of almost invisible balls of light flew out of the torn tent. Powerful magic shot out from these balls, enveloping almost all the enemies on the left wing. Half of the cavalry and their mounts immediately fell into chaos, screaming in fear. Some collapsed on the ground, while others ran around aimlessly.

Following that, another of the same spell was cast 40 metres ahead and to the right. The enemies there were confused as well, and under the wind wolves' lead the orcs seized the opportunity to

attack once more. They formed six distinct arrows, killing more than a dozen of Schitich's men in an instant.

Schitich was tied up by the warrior of darkness and Gangdor, left unable to escape. The five captains who'd been dismounted fell apart rapidly, all killed under the combined attack of the two trolls and Waterflower.

Zendrall didn't continue to summon any more undead, instead continuing to strengthen the curses on Schitich as per Richard's command. The battle tilted quickly once all the captains were killed, and Richard began directing his troops in repeated attacks that destroyed the enemy formations in the blink of an eye. All of Richard's contracted slaves then surrounded Schitich and attacked him, while the knights split into two teams and pursued the remnants of the cavalry.

The battle had completely collapsed at that point, and Schitich's men began to flee. Schitich himself felt a great threat, roaring as he twirled his axe around himself a few times to force Gangdor and the warrior of darkness back. He then roared again, tossing his enormous axe towards Richard with all his might.

The enormous axe bore down on Richard with terrifying force!

Gangdor roared out, exhausting all his strength to put himself between Richard and the enormous axe. The broken axe in his hand was finally split in two, and Gangdor himself was thrown a few metres away unable to get up. Fortunately this left the axe spinning in another direction, cutting two orc warriors in half before it buried itself into the ground. Even after all this, the handle of the axe continued to vibrate. Richard's body was shining with magic light. Three defensive spells—Barrier, Range Shield, and Nullify Damage—were impacted by the shockwaves, and Richard himself was pushed a few metres back. However, the spells would have made it quite difficult for Schitich to kill him even without Gangdor's desperate defense.

Schitich immediately fled towards the city the moment he threw out his axe. However, the darkness parted to reveal an ethereal Waterflower behind him. The Shepherd of Eternal Rest flashed past his body, and the girl stopped pursuing.

Breath of Darkness. The most powerful ability of Waterflower's rune set had been put on display.

Schitich sprinted a few more metres, but the back of his armour suddenly split open to let loose a rain of blood. He struggled two more steps forward, but eventually collapsed.

With their leader down, the rest of the cavalry had no more will to fight. A small number of them fled, while dozens surrendered.

Richard walked over to the enormous magic axe that was still stuck in the ground, gently stroking the handle. His hand seemed stable, but in fact his fingertips were trembling ever so slightly. The power behind this axe was enormous— if not for his defences, a direct strike from it would definitely have killed him. Flowsand would not be able to save him; she would only learn to revive others at level 18. Besides, the side-effects of revival were as great as its use.

Of course, the tight protection he had meant it was quite unlikely for him to be struck. But seeing the handle of this mighty axe fly towards him, he'd felt another brush with death. His heart had shuddered for a moment, but there was an unusual hint of excitement in there as well.

This dance with death seemed to be inspiring another rune series. Richard himself felt like he was a bit of an extreme lunatic.

"Good work tonight, this is the first time we won with you only commanding. It seems like Norland won't just have a new runemaster when we return, but a talented commander as well," Flowsand's voice sounded from behind him.

Richard smiled awkwardly, clenching his fist to relax the fingers

that were stiff from nervousness. He lowered his voice, “I was almost killed. What’s so good about that?”

“Haha!” Flowsand laughed, “You’re a mage of the Deepblue!”

“What do you mean?” Richard did not understand.

“If you were in Norland, many people would realise you were trained in the Deepblue the moment you joined the battle.”

Richard was very puzzled, “How? I didn’t use any special magic just now. The Deepblue has some unique spells, sure, but most are Master’s creations and are at the legendary realm. They’re impossible for me to learn.”

Flowsand shook her head, “I’m not referring to any special spell. It’s the style of your fights. Mages of the Deepblue are all strong physically, and also put great focus on self-protection. They’re much better at staying alive.”

Most mages in Norland were protected by reliable knights. At a critical moment, the knights would instinctively act the same as Gangdor had, using themselves as shields. Thus, many mages focused purely on the pursuit of the ultimate offence, not putting too much thought into defending themselves. On the battlefield, a mage wouldn’t last long if all their defenders were taken out anyway.

Richard was startled slightly, as he hadn’t thought of that point. The moment the battle began, he’d taken the chance to channel every protective spell he could onto himself as he gave out his commands. If not for the increase in danger that would arise from reduced mobility, he would have cast stone skin as well.

Thinking over his experience from multiple battles, Richard was convinced by the Deepblue’s definition of a strong mage: ‘The greatest deterrence a mage can pose is being able to stay alive and conserve mana on the battlefield.’

“Go, save them!” Richard gave Flowsand a pat on her back,

“Remember to keep half your mana in reserve.”

Book 2, Chapter 90

Cruelty

Almost half of Schitich's army had yet to show up, but news of his death had been spread by the soldiers who managed to escape. The dragon formation that had been making its way over from the city could be seen turning back, indicating that the rest of the soldiers were unlikely to continue their attack.

After all, eighty of Schitich's strongest soldiers, all personally under his command, had been almost completely wiped out. If they attacked now, the remaining captains and the less than hundred cavalry would all face the same fate.

Richard started moving all around the camp, barking out orders, "Clean up the warzone. Heal the wounded and gather the captives. Take the corpses away, gather the horses..."

Everything went quite smoothly, and the aftermath of the battle was taken note of. There were 16 captives and more than 50 intact horses. Eleven enemies had escaped, while almost sixty had died. Richard himself had lost three footsoldiers and five half-orcs. Roughly a dozen more were injured, but Flowsand could fix anything outside of death and broken limbs. They would soon be brought back to full capacity.

Richard's core party didn't participate in the cleanup. They took the time to rest and heal, recovering their abilities as soon as possible. Outside of a second attack from the city, they also had to be ready for any attacks from the surrounding camps.

Everyone here was no saint, most looking to take advantage of the rest. It was just that Richard had won by a landslide, and the surrounding camps didn't know too much about him. They didn't know whether they would benefit much even if they won, and after seeing the battle they weren't sure they could.

“All the bodies have been searched, my Lord. How do you want us to deal with them?” A foot soldier came to ask for instructions.

Richard muttered to himself for a while before saying, “Stake the ordinary soldiers and leave them propped up at the side of the camp. Send the bodies of the captains over to Zendrall. As for Schitich... Zendrall!”

“Yes?” the necromancer asked without lifting his head. He was busy retrieving the injured warrior of darkness.

“I have some plans for Schitich’s corpse. Would leaving him on the stakes for a few days be a problem?”

Zendrall was a little shocked, saying helplessly, “If we make some preparations beforehand, he can be transformed into a skeleton knight. However, that will leave him two levels lower than a warrior of darkness. If I have his corpse now, I will be able to summon a warrior of darkness with his soul.” To be honest, the expression and response seemed unlike that of a necromancer.

Having seen the capabilities of the warriors of darkness, Richard didn’t have any grand illusions of their powers. As such, seeing Zendrall send his current one back to his summoning plane. He immediately said, “You have thirty minutes to take care of Schitich’s corpse, but I want his face to be preserved without damage.”

The necromancer had to extract the soul from Schitich’s body, flooding the corpse with the energy of death to preserve his original power. It only took a few minutes to finish the task.

Half an hour later, tens of stakes were erected at the outskirts of Richard’s camp on some empty land, a lifeless body without armour nailed to each. At the centre was a pillar that was thrice as high, with Schitich hanging from atop it. There were ten lit torches nearby, illuminating the Two-Headed Dragon and his subordinates.

If not for the necromancer's requirements, Richard would have cut their limbs off before displaying them.

Under the cover of the night, countless pairs of eyes bore witness to this horrific scene. The bustling camps quieted down, and the bonfires originally burning in the city gradually faded away.

"I want to make an example to the rest of these rats, this is how anyone who tries to kill me ends up!" Richard said as he gazed at the city. He then waved his hands, "It looks like there won't be any other incidents tonight, you can go sleep."

Gangdor was stood half-naked on an empty patch, using a pail of water to clean the wounds on his body. His compact muscles and the rune on his right shoulder seemed full of energy. Once Richard made his way back to his tent, Gangdor gently stroked his chin, "Boss is growing more cruel."

Olar suddenly appeared out of nowhere, nodding in agreement. He spoke up in a tone full of emotion, "Behind every cruel boss are at least two cruel women."

Gangdor nodded his head vigorously, "That makes sense. Who said it?"

"Me!"

The bard's words caused Gangdor's face to warp to one of disappointment. Had it been some great person in history who said this, it would have made for a great quote. Coming from Olar, they didn't have enough strength. However, something lit up in his big head as he asked, "Two cruel women... Did you provoke Waterflower and Flowsand?"

Olar's expression immediately soured. The curiosity in Gangdor's gaze immediately faded away, and there was no sarcasm or schadenfreude either.

"Which one?" he asked, expression full of sympathy. He didn't believe the elven bard would dare provoke both of them. Had he

really done so, he would not be here standing perfectly intact.

Olar hesitated for a long time before speaking, “....Waterflower.”

Gangdor shrugged his shoulders, “Why not Flowsand?”

“It seemed like Waterflower was a little interested in me, and it’s obvious Flowsand is not. Sounding her out would only get me a little hurt at most, she wouldn’t go so far as to kill me. Flowsand, on the other hand... If she wanted to hurt or kill me, she would have many ways.”

“You’re smart!” Gangdor praised him. He then pulled Olar closer, lowering his voice, “How did you ‘provoke’ Waterflower, give me details!”

Gangdor’s arm was thicker than both of the elf’s combined, and it was at least three to four times as strong as well. The steely grip left Olar hardly able to breathe, and he understood the threat. Gangdor wouldn’t let him off easily if he didn’t tell him everything. But that didn’t matter, the only reason he even came over was to look for someone to share his woes and stress with.

“I then touched her butt...” Olar managed to squeeze the words out of his throat.

“Touched her butt? Did you really touch it?” Gangdor’s eyes turned extremely bright with anticipation. Sadly the bard still disappointed him, even though that was only to be expected.

“It wasn’t a full touch, my finger just bumped into her, and...” Even though it was a small, cheap thrill, it still resonated strongly with the bard.

“And?” Gangdor asked eagerly, even more pity in his tone.

“And...” Olar forced a smile and continued, “And I realised the true purpose of her steel pike.”

Gangdor laughed heartily, sweeping up and down over the bard’s body and then patting him hard on his shoulders, “You found out

about Waterflower's pike, but you could still stand and fight with such strength tonight. Did you go look for Miss Flowsand as well?"

Olar's body trembled uncontrollably as he nodded his head, continuing with an unbeatable darkness in his tone, "I was hurt so badly that I could barely walk. If I didn't want Master to find out, I had no choice but to look for Miss Flowsand in secret. However... She only cast lesser heals on me throughout the night!"

The corner of Gangdor's eyes twitched a few times.

All healing spells were similar, utilising magic to quicken the healing process. The only difference was the rate of acceleration. Lesser heals accelerated the process as well, but the effect was much smaller.

In a plane that advocated violence and war, being able to bear the pain of an injury was fundamental to every man. No warrior worth his salt cried out in pain during the healing process, just gritting their teeth and dealing with it.

However, even though Olar's injuries needed much more powerful healing Flowsand had insisted on lesser heals. Gangdor estimated it would have taken twenty to thirty sessions at a minimum, each a few hours long. The movement of the wounds every time would greatly intensify Olar's pain, and the bard suspected that Flowsand had secretly added a spell that heightened his perception during the process.

Olar had previously witnessed Richard and Flowsand's process of interrogating criminals. He shivered as he recalled how Flowsand maximised the pain as she treated the criminals with lesser heals.

Gangdor coughed once and patted Olar on the shoulders with sympathy, "You've been given a fright."

"It's not as simple as a fright! You don't understand the feeling!" the bard suddenly grew agitated.

"Alright alright. Looking at how pitiful you are, let me give you a

word of advice. Waterflower is not as simple as she seems.”

“Waterflower?” Olar was startled. In his eyes, the girl had just used her strength by instinct.

“Think about it. Why did Waterflower allow your finger to brush against her butt? If she didn’t mean for it to happen, you definitely wouldn’t have had the chance. Even with ten hands, she would cut them all down before they reached her!” Gangdor prompted profoundly.

Olar broke out in a cold sweat, “Don’t tell me... She did it so I couldn’t tell Master? After all, I was the one who started...”

Gangdor opened his big mouth, “You touched her with a finger, but she returned it with a pike. Isn’t that fair?”

The bard turned white as a ghost, starting to resemble a lost soul. What kind of fairness was this? However, he felt powerless to complain.

“You said it yourself. Behind every cruel boss are two women who are even crueller.”

Book 2, Chapter 91

Business

The Bloodstained Lands followed a simple yet effective principle: one's wealth should not exceed their power.

In simple terms, one needed the ability to protect themselves. They could only possess wealth and status proportional to their strength. Of course this wasn't written down anywhere, but many years of unregulated conflict had made it a basic way of life.

Two desert lions at the top of the food chain were more likely to try and intimidate the other than fight, gauging the other's strength and limits before moving on to weaker prey. In most parts of the Bloodstained Lands, including Bluewater Oasis, the law of the jungle prevailed.

Or at least, that's what Richard came to believe after an hour-long conversation with the old man from the store about the place.

With the sun having dawned, the bloody events of the previous night and Schitich's fate became the talk of the city. The events may seem exhilarating at first, but to those who had lived on the edge for a long time this was just like any other news. There were even some brazen people who approached Richard's camp, looking at the display of corpses. It spoke volumes about Richard's determination.

Richard had entered the city in the early hours of the morning, bringing the same people as the last time. However, the bar was closed this morning and he was not here to drink. Seeing the shop opened and the elder sitting there with nothing to do, he went over and sat across him for a chat.

His subordinates weren't courteous to Schitich's business. They smashed the bar door open, scaring the waitresses who'd been lucky enough to survive but had nowhere to go. They weren't

there to slaughter, however; they just took the tables and alcohol out, seating themselves close enough to protect Richard. The ruckus of the previous night had clearly left a lasting impression.

This street had tens of shops, all of various sizes. There were many other workers like this old man, just sitting at the entrance without any work. They rarely saw any customers; while they were stacked with items, most things were torn and tattered. It was obvious they were of little value.

The old man's store, on the other hand, had proper stock. But that was what made its presence on this street right next to the bar seem strange and out of place.

Only after the chat had Richard realised that the items in the shops were only for show. In fact, each shop had a power behind it, its type and size hinting at the real business. Hide shops represented orcish slaves, while cloth shops were barbarian trades. The shops selling stone carvings traded in large numbers of desert people, while in addition to alcohol and women the bar took on bounties and had a mercenary business. If Richard saw someone unpleasant, he could have spent a sum of money to hire Schitich's troops to kill him in the middle of the streets.

It wasn't wrong for Richard to buy information, just that he looked too young and delicate. He was a completely unfamiliar face, and didn't even look like a passerby from somewhere else in the Bloodstained Lands. Even more important was that he had paid too much money at the start for information. Schitich's cavalry itself only took half a coin to hire two of the captains, and for fifty gold Schitich himself wouldn't have minded coming out.

As for this shop owner, he dealt in the trade of all kinds of rare materials, including many goods prohibited in the human kingdoms. Richard's curiosity had been piqued immediately, and his interest only grew deeper the more he listened. The mention of maple amber, flying snake venom and lafite steel had made him grow excited.

“It’s just a daring question, but who is the owner of this shop?” Richard had asked. The place was pitifully small, with only two similar shops along the entire street. It made him all the more curious about the old man’s identity.

The elderly man had smiled, “There’s nothing to tell you, it’s an open secret. My store belongs to Anrick, widely known as the Marquess of Strength.”

One’s aristocratic title was changed in Faelor to signify that they were different from anyone else. This may be due to them being a hero, or having royal blood coursing through their veins. There may be very strong fighters under their control, or they might have supernatural powers. Whatever the reason, these nobles had more strength and influence than normal, but because of some factors weren’t higher in the hierarchy.

“That’s quite the influence,” Richard commented.

The old man nodded, “Indeed. I’ve grown old in recent years, and my passion isn’t as high as it used to be. I like personal chats more these days. My influence is really good for you, it should be enough.”

Looking at the followers behind Richard, the old man continued, “You’re young and remarkable, those guards definitely aren’t simple. It seems like you have both a strong family and a great teacher as well. Only those idiots like Schitich will have subordinates who assume you’re inexperienced and try to take advantage of you.” He then laughed at his own statement.

The old man had been quite gentle when talking to Richard since the last night, as if he wasn’t facing a dangerous outsider but a good chatting partner instead. “Schitich already paid for his idiocy, though. However, these matters tend not to end so easily.”

Richard stretched his body in a relaxed manner, “I admit I was a bit heavy-handed in the matter, but I don’t believe this is any problem for the Marquess. My teacher taught me to let work be

handled by professionals, and I believe there are many professionals in this city. The Marquess might be one of the most professional of the lot.”

"Very clever of you, little one," the old man nodded approvingly, "But why should the Marquess solve your problems for you?"

“Because Anrick and I have a lot of business to do together.”

"I? Not we?" The old man was very keen to capture the meaning behind Richard's words.

“I. Not, my teacher, not my family; the business will be with me,” Richard said in a calm tone.

Book 2, Chapter 92

Business(2)

The old man wasn't disappointed by the answer, his interest instead piqued further. "Like?" he asked.

"I need a large amount of magic materials of all varieties, for one. I would also like to ask, is the Marquess a worshipper of the gods?" Richard's eyes widened as he made the query, carefully watching the old man as he awaited a reply. He was just like any studious young noble, humble and well-mannered and brimming with a desire for knowledge. This seemed to be a quality the old man appreciated the most.

"My Lord is of royal blood, and they've produced legendary heroes in the past. His family has worshipped their ancestors for generations."

Ancestral worship wouldn't be a problem. Richard realised he was growing more and more fond of ancestral worship.

"If the Marquess has no objections, I can sell you a batch of magic scrolls that mainly contains healing spells." Richard's voice was so low this time that only the old man could hear him.

A bright glint suddenly swept past the old man's eyes, his expression growing much more serious as he said solemnly, "Which god? One needs the appropriate cleric to use a scroll."

"The God of Valour. The beauty of this batch is that they can be activated by anybody. However, the drawback is that there's a great price to pay to use them. They take a few years off a person's life."

The old man fell silent for a long while before saying, "Any intelligent being knows what to choose between a short life and immediate death. That won't be a problem, but... It's truly astounding that you have such tainted scrolls on you. Rest assured,

neither I nor the Marquess will dig deeper into the reason why you have them, that is a rule. You also have my word that nobody wants to get you in any trouble with the gods. If you could pass these tainted scrolls to my shop for business, the trouble with Schitich can be solved for gold.”

“Good, I’ll bring some along when I visit tonight,” Richard decided swiftly.

When he left, Richard noticed that those sitting at the shops were looking at him differently. They seemed more normal now, with less greed and murderous intent.

Most of them were agents for powerful men, with no need to pay attention to a living Schitich, much less a dead one. Those who’d pointed Richard out were all lesser agents who worked for the weaker people.

Even after Richard had come back to the city, these people had still been evaluating him. They were mainly looking at his wealth, determining whether his abilities matched up to his worth. If Richard was too rich for his power, they wouldn’t mind teaming up in the dark to ‘reclaim’ the excess that they felt didn’t belong to him. However, his agreement with Marquess Anrick meant that, at least to a certain extent, he was off limits.

Richard visited the old man’s grocery store once more after nightfall, bringing along three magical scrolls. There was one for each of the first three grades of spells.

The only one in the shop was the old man, and after accepting the three scrolls he gave Richard a hundred coins as deposit. He could only determine the real worth of the scrolls after a detailed evaluation, so Richard took the deposit. He was rather shocked to find that these were church-minted coins, not from the God of Valour but from the Highland Wargod.

Richard didn’t return to his camp outside of the city, instead going back to the luxurious inn he’d booked the first night.

The inn was luxurious and comfortable, but that was not the sole reason for its expense. The place also had a certain amount of security to it. It belonged to the Golden Warflag group, one of the three most powerful groups in the Bloodstained Lands. They were far stronger than Red Cossack, and scum like Schitich wouldn't dare to mess around near one of their inns.

Once Richard left, the old man closed the shop's door and took out an alchemist's magnifying glass to closely study the composition of the three scrolls. He looked them over for a few hours, eventually letting out a long sigh. He then smacked his own lower back before taking out a small bottle and pulling the cork off. A few shadows flew out, swiftly disappearing everywhere without being obstructed by the walls.

Half an hour later, three hooded men arrived at the grocery shop. They were all very familiar with the place, heading straight for the back room.

When they took off the cloaks, it was revealed that all three were rather old. They didn't bother to greet each other, instead going straight for the scrolls and beginning to research them in detail. After the three scrolls passed through each man's hands, an hour had gone by.

"Where did you get this, Armin?" one of them asked the old man.

"A kid named Richard sold them to me. He's the one who slaughtered Schitich and half his men, putting their bodies on display outside his camp."

Another one of them snorted coldly, "What an arrogant fellow!"

"He's a young man after all," another brokered a compromise, "And he looks like he has a strong family backing. It would be hard for him not to be arrogant. Kellac, you were a priest of the Highland Wargod, have a look and see if they're real."

The old man named Kellac was reticent. Ever since he entered

the shop, he'd constantly flipped through the scrolls, studying each line under a magnifying glass and tracing each pattern carefully.

He spoke with a hoarse, unpleasant voice, "These are real scrolls, not fakes produced by magic. They should have been smuggled out from one of the Churches of Valour. The spells look alright and completely usable, but they differ slightly from the real scrolls of the church. The mechanism is slightly different, but I can't tell where exactly.

"Look at this." Kellac pointed at the side of a grade 3 healing scroll, "I haven't ever seen this part in any spell of the God of Valour. Nine of the seventeen inscriptions are ones I don't recognise, and their structure is unprecedented. I can't understand the meaning behind these things at all."

The four men grew dignified, looking at each other before Amon spoke up, "It seems like these really are genuine tainted scrolls. And we don't know which force tainted them."

"I only need to perform a small experiment to make sure," Kellac offered.

He fished out a golden plate, placing the scrolls from Richard atop it. He then took out a small sceptre, reciting an incantation. The crystal atop the sceptre shot out a beam of red-hot light.

The grade 3 healing scroll immediately caught on fire, but most of the flames didn't escape the plate. Only a thread of orange-red with a faint column of gold slowly wisped out to a metre's height, making for an extremely eye-catching sight.

Book 2, Chapter 93

Background

Kellac unfurled a scroll that he'd brought himself to reveal a series of names of deities. Every name corresponded to a strip of colour, together forming a chart that transitioned from black to white. Chart in hand, the former cleric carefully compared the colours and names to the wisp of flame rising from the plate. The reddish orange could be seen corresponding to the God of Valour on the chart, but there was no name for the light gold apart from a neighbouring strip of golden red.

Once the scroll burned completely, Kellac let out a long breath and wiped the sweat off his forehead. He looked quite exhausted, exercising extreme caution as he stowed the scroll away before relief finally showed on his face.

That small, exquisite scroll didn't have any special powers. Its only purpose was that the colour chart listed every known deity on this plane. The strips of colour had a trace of the deity's divine power sealed within, but when the scroll was rolled up this presence would vanish without a trace. It was evident that this was a rare material.

Be it in the human kingdoms or otherwise, any religious places would burn the possessor of such a scroll at the stake as per an oracle sent down by their god. Human kings or even popes of churches would be no exception, and if someone was powerful enough to ignore most powers divine punishment or a deity's avatar would be sent to seek them out and kill them.

This small scroll was known as the Book of the Gods, amongst the highest level of classified information of every church. It was a first order taboo, to be found and destroyed no matter where it surfaced.

Thankfully, the Bloodstained Lands had always been forsaken by

the gods.

The three other men watched as Kellac pondered over his results. Carefully sorting out his scroll, he finally spoke up, “Indeed, most of this scroll came from the God of Valour. If someone else was handed this scroll, they might not have noticed the anomaly within. However, there’s a faint trace of another power nestled within Neian’s own. As for its nature... It’s somewhere between Runai and Cerces, the deities of time and space.”

Amon slowly spoke up, “Doesn’t that mean this trace of divine power doesn’t belong to any true god of this plane? Is it a heretic god of another plane?”

Kellac shook his head in reply, “That can’t be. Since he can nestle his own divine power within Neian’s, it’s clear that he’s extremely familiar with the rules of this plane. Foreign gods would not be able to achieve this. This trace of divine power exceeds the threshold of a demigod, approaching that of a true deity. It’s likely some unknown demigod of this plane is preparing to transcend. This batch of scrolls was tainted by a true cleric, it isn’t a counterfeit.”

Silence pervaded the room for a moment, the atmosphere so heavy it grew nerve wracking. The impending birth of a true god was incomparably significant to the entire plane. The people and interests involved could overthrow countries, kill entire peoples, or even tear lands apart!

All four of these old men had their own identities and held uncommon power. However, in front of such an important matter all of it seemed negligible, not worthy of mention at all. In front of a true god, the entirety of the Bloodstained Lands may as well be nothing, forget characters like them who held limited power over some parts of it.

Another of the old men gazed at Kellac, finally speaking up, “This might be your chance, old friend.”

Kellac was preoccupied with something, but the words of this man caused his entire body to jolt. It was evident that the other man had expressed his own concerns. It took a while for him to speak up, “I’m already very old. My body has been burned by divine power and is falling apart. Besides, this is merely a demigod... If I don’t receive his genuine acceptance and blessings, it will be completely impossible for me to become a high priest.”

Amon sighed, “You can’t live much longer anyway. The gods of this plane no longer accept you, and you’re not willing to rely on foreign gods. This is your last chance.”

Kellac laughed bitterly, “Even if I wanted to rely on the heretic gods of foreign planes, I wouldn’t have a chance. None of the invaders we’ve met have had a cleric able to cast spells. This means that these foreign gods cannot extend their power into Faelor at all.”

“This Richard is clearly close to the new god. Perhaps there might be a chance with him,” another said.

Kellac nodded, “If there’s a chance, let’s contact him and see exactly what he wants. It definitely won’t be as simple as doing some business to earn gold. The birth of a new god normally implies crisis and battle.”

“There’s another interesting bit of news,” one of them spoke up, “A formidable group of invaders appeared northeast of the Bloodstained Lands not long ago. The churches of Circe and Neian sent a combined force with hundreds of paladins to meet them, but they were all wiped out. Their current whereabouts are unknown.”

“Whereabouts unknown?” Amon immediately took out a map and examined it carefully under a magic lamp, tracing his finger south the entire time. “That can only mean one thing: they’ve entered the Bloodstained Lands.”

The four men looked at one another, all thinking of Richard at

the same time. However, they quickly dismissed the idea. One of them had been observing the entirety of the massacre outside the city last night, and they understood some details of the battle. The kid did indeed have capability and power that surpassed his age, but he was still far from wiping out the combined forces of Circe and Neian.

Amon looked at everyone before speaking up, “Looks like we have some more preparation to do now. Things definitely won’t be peaceful in the future.”

The few old men nodded their heads and left.

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Richard spent that entire night on high alert, even though he appeared relaxed. Although he was staying in an inn of the Golden Warflag and had established connections with Marquess Anrick, this was still the Bloodstained Lands. Anything could happen at any time.

Contrary to Kellac’s assumptions, Richard really didn’t have too much of a motive at Bluewater Oasis. He merely wanted to do some business to earn money. Gold meant equipment, warriors, and materials. The first two would directly amplify his power, while the last he could use to boost his forces further given he spent some time.

Book 2, Chapter 94

Background(2)

And thus, Richard started to manufacture the goods he wanted to sell. He wanted to craft two strength runes that worked with magic crystals, the design even simpler than the one he gave Stormhammer while the amplification was controlled to 15%. They took up four hours of his time, costing roughly 2000 coins total. A single magic crystal could activate these runes ten times.

It was a particularly busy night for Olar as well. The elven bard was busy embedding two magic boxes with rubies. Elves were famed for their aesthetic ability, and Olar was no different.

Although embedding more rubies into the box wouldn't enhance the runes within in any way, Richard had still made him embed more than a thousand gold's worth of rubies into the boxes. The bard was initially confused about this, but once Richard explained the purpose of these rubies that turned into intense adoration.

Since runecrafting hadn't been discovered before in Faelor, Richard believed that they lacked an impartial standard for how much a single rune would cost. The stronger and closer to their limit a person was, the more valuable runes became. The magical boxes were actually for the sake of the buyers, who'd never seen a rune before. If even the boxes used to store these runes were worth over a thousand coins, whatever was within would definitely be worth much more.

Early morning the next day, Amon sent someone over with a letter inviting Richard to lunch. It was at a venue not far from the hotel, known for its unique dishes and tribal flavours.

Outside of Amon, the rest of the shopkeepers from the street were attending as well. There was also an obese, sly-looking businessman called Devon and an old man named Kellac who Richard had never met before.

Devon introduced himself as the leader of the Golden Warflag's contingent in Bluewater Oasis, and a member of the Bluewater Council. Of everyone present here, he had the highest rank. Kellac was a high-ranking member of the Demon Hunting Spears, a group of adventurers, slavers, and mercenaries. Even though they were only a few hundred strong, each was extremely skilled in battle. Since they weren't a large group, they were swift and flexible, a group that the larger merchant groups did not wish to offend. Others hired them for jobs they didn't want to make public, like exterminating a rival.

Everyone greeted each other once they entered the meeting, exchanging compliments and sounding each other out. Of course, Richard didn't manage to get any new information, but that was the same for everyone else. Everyone here, young or old, was a cautious and sly fox. Perhaps Richard's age made him less mature than the rest, but his caution did not lose out. He kept certain matters extremely well-hidden as he spoke, not allowing any information about his background to leak.

However, who amongst those present was ordinary? Without Richard needing to mention it, his bearing, knowledge, age, level, and following already indicated what sort of person he was. Had he been thirty years old he would not be worthy of everyone's time, but at the age of sixteen or seventeen any smart person wouldn't be willing to provoke him senselessly. Everyone present had many thoughts in their hearts, some even guessing that Richard had the backing of both a Marquess-level family and someone of legendary might.

Their guesses were quite close to the truth, except for two things — His background was far greater than even their boldest imaginations, and his legendary backer wasn't even from this plane.

Once the pleasantries were done with, everyone got down to business. Kellac was the first to express interest in buying the

scrolls; he wanted every scroll on offer. He would pay ten gold for a grade 1 scroll, 30 for a grade 2, and tripling again with every next grade. This was a fair price as long as one talked about the more common scrolls that were grade 5 or below. Any grade 6 scroll could easily cost more than 10,000 gold, while anything above couldn't be bought even if money was not an issue.

These tainted scrolls were priced much higher than normal ones. Even though they came with a cost in life force, anyone could use them. On the other hand, normal scrolls could only be used by the clergy, limiting their usage greatly. Where was one to find a priest or cleric to activate these scrolls in the Bloodstained Lands? Even if there were some, they still had to take care not to overstep the bounds of their faith.

As such, be it robbers or mercenaries, once someone got hurt in battle they could only rely on holy water or other herbal medicine to recover. They had to depend on their sturdy physiques to live through the ordeal, as these medicines paled in comparison to healing spells. Besides, since they were the only choice they didn't come cheap.

This was when the value of the scrolls Flowsand had taken shone through. Flowsand could cast grade 5 spells herself, so scribing grade 3 scrolls wasn't impossible for her. However, she could only scribe one such scroll a day with her divine power. On the other hand, the divine power from the Church of Valour's scrolls allowed her to manufacture upto three grade 4 scrolls a day.

And that ignored these tainted scrolls that sacrificed the user's life force. These were even easier to make, and Flowsand could modify five of them in a day. She said that this was because most of the might came from the God of Valour, not requiring much of her own mana. Besides that, she'd also hinted that producing these scrolls actually helped her grow her mana pool, not taking away.

And now that he heard Kellac's offer, Flowsand's image had warped in Richard's heart. She was now a gold mint, able to create

more than a thousand coins in a day. His interest in the various churches increased as well— there were virtually countless such scrolls in those places. Even though they had carted away two boxes with over a hundred scrolls on their attack back in Forza's territory, that was less than a third of what the church there had!

Devon was greatly interested in these tainted scrolls as well, but only in the grade 4 ones with greater heals. He offered 300 coins a scroll, wanting twenty of them.

Richard could roughly guess what use Devon had for the scrolls. A strong fighter armed with one technically had another life in battle. Besides, a powerful business group like his naturally had a slaving group he could call his own. If he armed the battle slaves with these scrolls, the team's capabilities would shoot up and allow them to attack stronger groups and catch more valuable slaves.

Thinking it over for a while, Richard was pleased with the offered prices. He would sell twenty grade 4 scrolls to Devon, and thirty grade 3 scrolls and ten grade 4 ones to Kellac. This was nine days of work for Flowsand, and made for the entirety of stock she had. This transaction alone would make him more than 10,000 coins.

Once this deal was closed, the relationships amongst those present grew more cordial. Even the greediest fellow who saw these tainted scrolls realised that Richard had his ways to keep his assets in control. There was a simple reason behind this. The offer of only a few scrolls could mean that Richard had bought them somewhere else. However, the magnitude of this deal and his openness to another one later only meant that he had a powerful group or family backing him.

The presence of these tainted scrolls indicated great strength, and promised frightening repercussions if Richard was ever provoked. Sometimes, there was no need for death and destruction if a deal could be reached for gold.

Book 2, Chapter 95

Slaves

Devon was obviously quite pleased with this transaction. He could hardly wait to see how great the benefits his slaving hounds could reap with this.

He raised his cup towards Richard with a smile, “Mr. Richard... Let us forget about that idiot Schitich, and have a good celebration. I hope we can have many more successful partnerships after today. Amon has many magical materials, while Bivier can procure a shocking amount of minerals. As for me, outside of gold you are most welcome to visit my slave camps if you’re interested. You might find something to your liking over there.”

Slave camp? Richard’s heart skipped a beat, and he immediately smiled and asked, “What kind of goods do you have in your camp, Mr. Devon?”

“Whatever you may want! Barbarians, orcs, demonic beasts, half-orcs, elves... Even the cruel and savage desert people, you can find them all at my slave camps!” Devon was brimming with confidence, waving his hands mightily before he lowered his voice and spoke with an air of mystery, “I recently came into possession of a batch of interesting goods. If you’re interested, I can show them to you tonight.”

Richard muttered to himself for a while before asking, “I want to select a group of people from your camp to form an escort team. Do you have any suggestions?”

A glimmer of light flashed across Devon’s eyes, “Slaves are the best kind of cannon fodder! They’re just quite dangerous and hard to control. As for the kind of slaves, you should choose based on the scale of your team and the terrain you normally fight in. If it’s a team that needs less than 500 and they’ll be fighting in the Bloodstained Lands, then the desert people are your best choice.

They can conquer the harshest of conditions, fighting two to three days without food or drink and still being in optimal condition. They're also natural horsemen.

“For smaller battles needing more personal strength I recommend headhunter orcs. Adult warriors are level 7 at least, and slaughter is their second nature. However, they're extremely dangerous. Barbarians of the snowpeak tribe make the best personal guard. Even teenagers are level 8, while trained adults can reach level 10. They have their own weakness though. They're too expensive, haha!”

The joke was quite lame, but everyone present still laughed merrily. This response showed the status this obese man enjoyed.

Devon had thrown out a few leads in that ardent explanation. He was sounding out Richard's future plans— whether he would be fighting in the Bloodstained Lands, his usual battle style, and whether the fights would be small in scale or large. Of course, to no one's surprise the young man maintained the same graceful smile from start to finish. There was no information to be gathered from his expression, as he didn't respond to Devon's questions in any way.

Through their private room's door, Richard glanced outside to see an eye-catching warrior who was obviously much taller and stronger than ordinary humans. He was half a head taller than even Gangdor himself, radiating a valiant aura from head to toe. Even though he was dressed in human clothing, one could still see that he was a barbarian warrior roughly around level 10, similar to Gangdor.

Richard pointed to the burly man, “That's a warrior of the snowpeak tribe?”

“Indeed. Zagu is my number one guard, and he's been following me for seven years.” Having said that, Devon had the fellow come over so Richard could get a close look at him.

Richard stood up and went a few rounds around Zagu. He even cast two detection spells, grabbing the barbarian's body from time to time. Zagu's face flushed with anger, but he stopped himself from acting up. Everyone present could see his displeasure, but nobody cared for the anger of a slave.

Richard didn't bother either. Norland had similar practices with slaves, and he was actually doing something important. He wasn't grabbing the barbarian out of curiosity, instead taking the chance to understand the structure of his body and especially the distribution of his bones and muscles.

Having completed a detailed inspection, Richard understood a little more about the barbarian race. He then returned to his seat, closing his eyes as all sorts of data was analysed and tidied in his mind. The figure of an adult barbarian slowly started to form in his consciousness, and although it was still a little fuzzy it would grow more detailed the more of Zagu's kind he met.

Barbarians were naturally gifted with tremendous strength, not unlike the orcs. They were natural fighters, easily able to cross level 10, but from that point forward advancing was extremely challenging. They found it hard to train their energy reserves, and unlike humans they were too primitive to have systems of skills and training method. Devon's bodyguard seemed to be quite strong, but there wasn't much room for improvement. He would cap out at level 12, and had little capacity for runes as well. He could use a single elementary rune at best.

Even though he was a single level above Zagu, Gangdor's eruption rune gave him immense strength. He also had a powerful bloodline, and had gone through rigorous training in the Archeron death camp. His skill was high enough for him to defeat even six or seven such barbarian warriors with ease. Things would only be different if the barbarians could also have bloodline abilities and high rune capacities.

Waving the man away, Richard asked, "This Zagu is an

outstanding warrior indeed. However, he is after all a slave, how do you guarantee loyalty?”

“Zagu is a third generation barbarian. The barbarians of the snowpeak tribe have one good point— their faith in their ancestors’ spirits. As long as they swear to something on their ancestral spirit, you can rest assured that they will be loyal. This is why I recommended them as guards,” Devon explained with a smile. He then shrugged his shoulders, “However, they really are extremely expensive. A young warrior with potential can cost more than a thousand gold, while I wouldn’t sell someone like Zagu even if you gave me 1,500 coins.”

Richard knocked on the table as he thought it over, before making up his mind. He would go with Devon in two days, visiting a slave camp to have a look.

At that time, Bivier the mineral merchant spoke up with a wide-eyed gaze, “Mr. Richard, I heard you’re a respected mage. Mages never fail to surprise us; do you have anything to offer aside from the scrolls? As long as the artifact is good, gold will not be a problem.”

Richard and smiled and said, “I so happen to have a good artifact here, I can let everyone appraise it. This is the result of my teacher’s latest research, the pinnacle of his achievement in alchemy and magic.”

He gestured to Olar, and the bard took out a magic box and carefully placed it on the table. Everyone with knowledge of the business could immediately tell that the jewels embedded into the box alone were worth more than a thousand coins. The craft was especially exquisite as well, obviously made by elven hands. Just the box alone could fetch a price of 1,200 coins.

The room grew quiet and everyone waited with bated breath. They watched closely at what sort of valuable artifact would emerge from this box that was worth more than a thousand coins.

Book 2, Chapter 96

Slaves(2)

Richard put on his gloves, his movements gentle and elegant. He slowly opened the box, showing the rune to everyone. Nobody knew what this piece of hide was used for, but many could tell that it had come from a thunder lizard. The magic crystal within was easy to recognise, and as for the magic arrays it was evident that these intricate lines were formed of very precious materials. The entire thing was simply a work of art.

Kellac studied the rune for a long time, but he couldn't tell the function of the array. However, even if he couldn't understand the principle it worked on he could tell what some of the smaller parts did. Most importantly, he understood what this array signified. It was a display of amazing technique, some parts reaching the level of grandmasters. He'd only had the chance to see such beautiful arrays twice or thrice in his life, and every one was the work of a grand mage.

He was the last of everyone present to sit back down, spitting out the warm air he'd held in for way too long. He spoke solemnly, "This is the work of a grand mage."

Amon exchanged a glance with the former priest before asking, "Mr. Richard, what is the use of this masterpiece?"

"This is called a rune, it can be attached to the body. With a small amount of life force and the mana from a magic crystal, it can amplify one's strength by about 15%. Each activation lasts for five minutes."

Everyone went deep into thought, pondering over this unprecedented 'rune' and its uses. Amon's hands trembled as he asked in a shaky voice, "This... rune... Does it have any effects on powerful people who've already entered sainthood?"

“Of course!” Richard replied. Norland’s runes were effective even on those of legendary might, what were these mock saints of Faelor in comparison?

“And what about other magical equipment? Will there be a clash?” The old man’s voice was trembling even harder.

“I’m buying this!” Devon suddenly yelled out, reaching out to snatch the box.

However, a slim yet strong hand gripped Devon’s hand. Amon stared directly into Devon’s eyes, enunciating each word, “Rolf needs this.”

The sword saint Rolf was Marquess Anrick’s younger brothers, one of the members of the Bluewater Council. He was also the most powerful person in Bluewater Oasis, his capabilities unrivalled. Powerful saints found it extremely difficult to advance in level, and no matter how short the burst was a 15% increase in strength was a huge benefit to one’s combat abilities.

However, Devon seemed undaunted by the mention of Rolf’s name. The Golden Warflag did not fear Marquess Anrick’s power, and his hand remained extended towards the box as he said with a sneer, “Rolf’s enemies need this as well!”

“But this artifact is of no use to you!” Amon’s expression grew sombre.

“It’s of use to the Golden Warflag. Even if I don’t need it personally need it, others do. I’m not the right person for you to ask about this, go look for Lord Trevor instead,” Devon replied sarcastically.

A disturbed look crossed Amon’s face. Trevor was the Golden Warflag’s second in command, the one leading the slave trade. A strong fighter and a level 17 saint, he was an enemy Rolf most definitely would not want to meet. His need for this kind of strength far exceeded that of Rolf.

Bivier, who was seated at the other end, suddenly leaned forward and looked into Richard's eyes. "This really is some good stuff," he said slowly, "Name your price!"

Devon and Anrick were startled, levelling penetrating gazes at Bivier as they said simultaneously, "'You want a piece of this as well?'"

"Why not?" Bivier retorted, showing no signs of backing down. This was quite rare; his backing was far weaker than Marquess Anrick or the Golden Warflag. However, his next sentence caused both Devon and Amon to have a complete change of expression, "General Rislant is getting ready to launch a large-scale expedition alongside the Dragon Church. He definitely needs this rune!"

Marquess Rislant was a famous general of the Iron Triangle Empire in the north, nearly undefeated in his entire life. At level 17, he was known for his tyrannical strength and the power of his subordinates. Bivier being under him now was a surprise.

However, the Iron Triangle Empire was a significant distance away from the Bloodstained Lands, separated by two duchies. Because of that, neither Devon nor Amon grew afraid as they continued struggling for the box.

Eventually Devon banged hard on the table, roaring in Richard's direction, "50,000 gold! Sell this to me!"

Seeing that the situations wasn't dire anymore, Amon folded his arms and laid back calmly as he raised the bid, "60,000."

"80,000" Bivier's confidence was comparable to that of the other two men.

"80,000? Do you even have that much on you?" Devon sneered.

Bivier smirked in response, "I still have five kilograms of Mithril!"

Being amongst the most outstanding magical metals, a kilogram of mithril could fetch upto 20,000 coins in a human empire.

“90,000!” Amon remained calm and collected, continuing to increase the price.

Devon broke out into a sweat. He chuckled maliciously, fixing his gaze on Richard as he spoke, “Mr. Richard! Just name a price, I’ll pay whatever you ask.”

Richard thought about it for a while, smiling in reply, “Alright.”

Everyone grew nervous once he opened his mouth. Outside of the three already bidding, two others had expressions that indicated they wanted to join in as well. Without batting an eyelid, Richard scanned everyone’s faces.

He gestured to Olar, and the elf took out another magic box and opened it in front of everyone, showing the exact same rune.

Everyone here was stunned for a moment, but this only riled them up further. Emotions ran high as another part expressed interest. Since there were two runes now, many felt that no matter what they had to at least bring one back. Gold was aplenty, but powerful saints were few and far between. Many of those sitting in the room could use this as a way to build a rapport with a powerful saint.

Richard thrust both boxes forward, “Both together will be 50,000 coins.”

“What?!” Everyone was taken aback by what they heard. It wouldn’t have been shocking if Richard had asked for 500,000 instead.

The first rune easily drew a high price of nearly 100,000 coins, and if bidding had continued everyone had the backing to easily push it past 300,000. An accessory to increase the strength of a saint, with no need for an agreement with the mage that crafted it, was worth any amount of gold.

Bivier was the first to react, immediately offering, “100,000!”

“120,000!” “150,000!” Another round of bidding broke out,

raising the price past 200,000 in a short amount of time.

Helpless, Richard laughed bitterly and lifted his arms to silence the crowd. Every pair of eyes was fervently glued onto him as he spoke, “These aren’t the only runes, I might be selling more in the future. I only ask for 50,000 for these, anything else is up to you guys.”

All sorts of expressions clouded the faces of those present. They all had different opinions and judgements about what Richard had just said.

Regardless of what they were thinking, however, the most important important matter at hand was to determine the allocation of the runes. Another round of intense contest later, it was ultimately decided that Devon and Amon would get a rune each while Bivier and the two others would receive some compensation.

The efficiency of the traders in the Bloodstained Lands was unparalleled. A chest of 50,000 gold was placed in front of Richard in a flash, so heavy it needed two strong men to carry it.

Book 2, Chapter 97

Expedition

Lunch had turned into an unexpectedly successful deal, but the gold didn't stay in Richard's hands for a long time. It only took him a day to give it back to the various powers of Bluewater. In fact, spending 50,000 coins in a single day garnered unordinary respect and envy, except from Red Cossack.

There were no secrets in Bluewater. News of the enmity between Richard and Red Cossack had quickly come to the attention of the local hegemon.

Richard was cruel and determined, defeating Schitich over a series of battles in one night to scare many people. Barely two days later, a business deal involving magic artifacts had given him a connection to the biggest powerhouse of Bluewater, sword saint Rolf. He also had a business relationship with the Golden Warflag, a group even more powerful than Red Cossack. This made Red Cossack somewhat worried, but he didn't dare to strike outright.

These worries were mostly limited to the confines of Bluewater. Once Richard left the city, it would be hard to predict what would happen.

Two-fifths of the gold had been exchanged for an array of magical materials, allowing Richard to make a total of seven more runes. And that was proper runes; he could now make more than twenty of the inferior ones. As for the rest of the coins, they were traded for a hundred desert people and fifteen snowpeak barbarians.

All of the desert people were adult males. They weren't particularly strong, but they had dark skin and a habit of keeping thick beards. They were mostly level 5, nothing special, but like Devon had said their survivability and horsemanship were unordinary. As long as they had a horse and a machete, they would

make for dangerous enemies in the desert.

The desert folk were naturally fierce and skilled in war. They were extremely dangerous, news about slaves killing their masters not uncommon. Thus, they were mostly sent to labour in mines or sent out as the first wave of a battle to act as cannon fodder.

As for the fifteen snowpeak barbarians, they swore loyalty to Richard on their ancestors. This gave him full control over them.

There were many ways of controlling slaves. The barbarians had theirs, but Richard chose something else for the desert folk. He split them into ten groups, each having one of the stronger men as the leader. If someone tried to escape or rebel, both he and the leader would be killed. In addition to that, two other members of the team would be selected at random and sacrificed as well.

On the other hand, Richard promised that ten kills in battle would immediately give them freedom along with ten gold coins. If they chose to remain thereafter, they would be rewarded with two coins for every kill.

As for the barbarians, Richard was much more careful with arming them. He spared much more gold for them, giving them proper weapons and armour. He promised them that they would be set free after twenty kills.

He wasn't sure whether this method would be effective, but that would be tested in future battles.

Stopping at Bluewater for a few more days, Richard finally finished preparing his supplies and equipment. He then brought the entirety of his troops out of Bluewater, heading to the depths of the Bloodstained Lands.

His forces had grown stronger, and he now had allies in the Bloodstained Lands who could give him certain benefits. Richard had gotten a small piece of land on the fringe of Bluewater, complete with a residence, a training camp, a jail, and much more.

Servants were arranged for him as well.

All that wasn't cheap, having come as a combined present by Devon and Rolf. The land was both a treasure and a sign, a sign that he had carved out his own niche in Bluewater. The gift was due in some part to the runes he'd sold them, but most of it was because of the imaginary demigod backing him.

Richard wrote Red Cossack a letter before he left Bluewater, asking for them to hand Red Hook over and compensate him with a hundred warhorses. Their leader flew into a rage the moment he read the letter, smashing half the items in his room to pieces and vowing to dismember Richard's body. The irritating kid didn't know what was good for him.

It wasn't a hard vow to fulfill. As long as he assembled the hundreds of guards he had in Bluewater, it was only a kilometre's march to the inn Richard was living in. However, he eventually decided to confine his anger at the mage to his office. He didn't respond to the letter.

However, that did not mean he would completely ignore it. He spent the entire afternoon writing eight letters out to people he knew well, successfully putting Richard's name on Red Cossack's blacklist. If Richard was found in the wild, their border guard would kill him on the spot. He also sent a bounty out to bandit groups through dark channels, offering 10,000 coins for Richard's corpse.

The mage himself remained unaware of the sizeable bounty on his head, taking his army into the depths of the Bloodstained Lands.

Nobody knew the purpose of this expedition. Those of Bluewater just assumed Richard had some other covert mission. He'd left a deep impression on everyone who attended the meeting, especially with the conduct during the sale of the rune that showed wisdom beyond his age. People speculated that he was acting under the

influence of a powerful family or backer. They'd originally thought he was a child of a noble clan with a bright future, but now they believed he was a core member in the line of succession.

However, Richard and the few people closest to him knew that they had no exact destination. This was nothing more than a hunting expedition, using war and massacre to grow their strength. It was something common across all planes.

Their team was quite unique, with a hundred desert people led by his footsoldiers and knights all on horseback. Although the half-orcs weren't skilled riders, they could still control the horses at the pace of a trot. The trolls and barbarians could only walk, with no warhorse able to carry their weight. It was a good thing that they were used to running; be it while sprinting or over time, they were not inferior to the horses.

Richard, Flowsand, and Zendrall rode ahead on their horses, with no carriage in sight. Most of their equipment was placed in boxes on the backs of the reserve horses.

The team of a little more than a hundred had close to 300 warhorses, guaranteeing their mobility. Surrounding the troops on the outside were wind wolves.

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On the fifth day, another strange team appeared in front of Richard. Over twenty knights that were distributed in various teams were slowly advancing through the desert, almost a hundred barbarians huddled close together in between. There were both adults and children, men and women, but there were no elderly. The barbarians were all injured, but they pressed on. If they walked any slower, they would be whipped viciously.

This was Richard's first encounter with a slaving team. Most concerning was the flag the slaving team carried—they were from Red Cossack. As such, it took him only half a minute to make the decision. He pointed at the slaving team, speaking icily, "Kill them

all!”

Book 2, Chapter 98

Expedition(2)

The ensuing battle was short but intense. A mere ten minutes later, the entirety of the slaving team had been reduced to a bunch of corpses.

The weakest knight of the team was level 10, and the strongest level 13. Their fierce defense had killed thirty of the desert folk, and there were some casualties amongst the barbarians and half-orcs as well.

However, once the battle was done thirty wounded warriors swore loyalty to him on their ancestors. In exchange, Richard let the remaining barbarians go free, permitting them to try and return to their ancestral plains.

The process was unusually smooth, partly because the snowpeak barbarians had told these new compatriots in detail about Richard's kindness of freeing them after twenty kills. In a place like the Bloodstained Lands that was constantly embroiled in war, killing twenty people was hardly a difficult task.

As for the dead slavers, all possible value was extracted from them. Zendrall successfully managed to turn half of their number into warriors of darkness, replacing his thousands-strong army with a small group of elite, everlasting warriors. This had been at Richard's request, matching up to standards in Norland. One couldn't rely on a large number of weaklings in war; given certain conditions, certain elites could destroy any amount of cannon fodder.

Cleaning up the aftermath of the battle, Richard's army continued to wander aimlessly around the Bloodstained Lands. No less than ten battles were fought over the next fifteen days, all of varying scale. He'd destroyed two more slaving teams, and battled a hundred man troop of horse thieves. He'd also captured a small

caravan, although he ended up just buying their goods instead of plundering them. That being said, he bought their goods at cost price.

Richard now had more than 300 desert people and 100 barbarians under him. Six of the desert people and eleven barbarian warriors had hit the required number of kills, winning freedom and gold. The barbarians were extremely fond of their homeland, and every one that secured their freedom chose to leave.

His magnanimity had paid off. Those who hadn't yet reached the quota stayed on and fought bravely, convincing all the other barbarians they came across to pledge loyalty to him and work hard for their chance at freedom. The number of barbarian warriors under his command was growing quickly.

This wasn't the same with the desert people. There were already five attempts to run, with one where an entire small troop escaped. However, even if they were fierce beasts in the desert Waterflower was a child of the wild. She alone was enough to hunt these traitors down, executing them all.

Richard kept his promise towards them as well, showing a balance of cruelty and grace. Five leaders had been executed because of subordinates trying to escape.

However, what was surprising was that the desert warriors who earned their freedom chose to stay. Their lands in the northwestern desert had been razed when they were captured, so even if they chose to leave there was no place they could call home. They were a fierce people, quite interested in the gold Richard had to offer.

Every fight ended with deaths and rewards.

In the midst of all this battle, Richard finally broke through to level 10. The elven blood in him continued to evolve, giving him an affinity towards nature. This affinity passively strengthened any nature spells he cast, also raising his perception and ability to

conceal himself.

The trolls grew to level 11 and mutated, both growing tougher. Their strength, endurance, vitality, and recovery rate were all boosted, putting Tiramisu on the path to becoming a battle mage.

What shocked Richard was Gangdor. He'd only just entered level 11 before they left, and he'd quickly grown to level 12 even if he wasn't completely stable there. This ox of a man had finally overtaken Waterflower by two levels, the latter still a little ways from level 11. However, even if he were two more levels up the young lady and the Breath of Darkness would prove to be a formidable opponent.

In the midst of all this, none of the experienced knights who'd come with him advanced in level. Besides that, only one of the novice knights captured later advanced, growing to level 11. The differences in innate talent between his team and the rest was growing more and more apparent.

However, the one whose powers had grown the most was the necromancer, Zendrall. He now had nearly twenty warriors of darkness that he could summon at will, although he only had the mana pool to support ten at a time. Whatever be the case, these warriors were all level 12 or above, and even with their slow reactions they were definitely over level 11 in terms of fighting ability. They would play a decisive role in any small battle.

Richard had made a name for himself in the past month, his reputation spreading to many horse bandits, mercenary groups, caravans, and slavers. However, that was all; powers rose and fell every day in the Bloodstained Lands, power and gold being the only order of the land.

This new everyday had grown mundane. Richard felt the month pass by like it was a year, blending into a red world of red memories. He woke up to a red morning, seeing the red land and rocks everywhere as he advanced. Every battle saw flashes of

scarlet blood, and dusk bathed the entire land in crimson. In this chaotic land of murder, the colour red had already grown synonymous with blood. There was no way to tell them apart.

In the midst of this blood red world, another two of the Archeron knights left Richard forever. Those who lived did not have the time to reminisce or mourn.

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As night approached one day, Richard got up on a high rock. He crouched down on the side of a cliff, looking down to sweep over the orc camp in the valley.

This was an average orc tribe, made of roughly 250 members. There were tents of varying sizes all around, with an altar erected at the back of the camp. A colourfully dressed shaman could be seen dancing an esoteric dance in front of the altar, a solemn drum beat continuously playing from afar and tempting Richard's heart to dance.

There was a bonfire lit at the centre of the camp. The women and elders were cooking food for the night, while several young ones were play-fighting off to the side.

Flowsand and Waterflower were stood at Richard's left and right, watching the camp as well. An orc hunter and his pet desert wolf were down in a pool of blood behind them, already having become a corpse.

This peak was in an excellent position, revealing the movements of everything within a few kilometres. That was why the tribe had placed a hunter on guard here. Sadly, it was his exact position that had exposed the location of their camp. Richard's vision was now far superior to that of an orc.

Book 2, Chapter 99

Expedition(3)

The orcs of this tribe had brown skin, indicating that they had been in the Bloodstained Lands for a few generations. Most orcs who came from the western plains were green or grey.

The orcish tribes of the Bloodstained Lands were not to be trifled with. Even smaller tribes often had bloodthirsty level 12 warriors, and they were natural hunters and soldiers that could adapt to harsh conditions. They possessed great tenacity, making them difficult to capture and at the same time even harder to control.

Most enslaved orcs were just sent off to work at mines, or forced into hard labour until they died of exhaustion. Some were sent to become gladiators in various arenas, but given the difficulty of turning them into a troop of cannon fodder they had little value. Thus, orc slaves weren't very expensive; in fact, they were even cheaper than desert warriors. Most slavers rarely ever tried to catch them, since even if they had a level 14 leader the desert people and barbarians were easier to capture. Besides, orcs weren't a profitable commodity.

These creatures bred quickly. Even though they lived about two thirds as long as the average human, they were twice as fertile. Even at the age of ten their children were qualified warriors as well.

The orcs of the Bloodstained Lands did not practise agriculture. Their food mostly consisted of fruits, roots, and animal meat. They didn't eat other intelligent races, even though if there was a drought they didn't mind feeding their wolves with the same.

As such every once in a while the orc population ballooned out of controls, and the slave traders would launch a joint expedition to cut down on their numbers. This was to ensure that their trade routes were unobstructed, and these brown-skinned beings didn't

flood the vast land.

A few days ago, a Golden Warflag group they encountered had told Richard that a new hunt was beginning. Considering it for a while, Richard had agreed to this invitation from an old friend.

Standing on top of the cliff, Richard saw a group of more than ten orc hunters returning to the camp from a few kilometres away. They had two fat wild boars on hand, all looking to be in high spirits. It seemed like there would be no need to worry about food for the next few days.

Surrounding the hunters were seven or eight desert wolves. As far as orcs were concerned, these wolves were the equivalent of hunting dogs.

Richard issued orders in his mind.

The desert wolves suddenly stopped in their tracks, letting out a few restless low groans. They started turning in place, putting the orc hunters on high alert. They set the prey down, tightly grabbing onto their weapons as they let out a few threatening growls towards the rocks on each side of the path.

A few massive wolves jumped atop the rocks, their threatening auras causing the desert wolves to yelp as they slowly retreated. The orcs, however, did not realise that this was a fatal threat. Although they couldn't recognise this breed, they weren't afraid of mere wolves.

That would be their undoing. The wind wolves weren't ordinary animals but weapons of destruction.

A shrill screech rang through the sky as a sharp arrow struck the chest of an orc. It passed through until even the feathers couldn't be seen, dropping him to the ground. This was when the orcs' resilience showed, as he stood up despite the damage he'd taken. It was then that the ground started to shake, as the sound of hooves neared the location. It soon grew thunderous, ringing in the orcs'

ears!

Standing atop the cliff, Richard saw a few of the desert warriors rushing towards the hunters under the guidance of the wind wolves. He knew this spelt the end for the orcs.

The barbarians, led by Medium Rare and Tiramisu, formed a line between the hunters and the orc camp. The tens of orcs who rushed out collided with them, unable to pass.

Gangdor, leading the half-orcs and knights, instructed the defensive line to let the reinforcements through. They then turned around, rushing into the emptied camp. Their target was the shamans of the camp.

The orcs who'd just rushed out of the camp roared, trying to make their way back. However, the barbarians instantly held them up, killing enough of them to break their main force. The intense resistance lasted for a mere few minutes before the battle turned into a massacre.

It was only once all the adults— male or female— were dead that the tribe gave up on resistance. The 250-strong tribe had been reduced to less than fifty members, all either old or very young. Richard had lost more than twenty of his own slaves as a result of the battle, and not for no reason. When Gangdor had killed their shaman, all the orcs had gone crazy.

Richard cast a featherfall spell and jumped off the cliff, covering the more than ten metres of height without issue. He floated down to the camp and took large strides towards the dead shaman, kicking the corpse aside as his gaze landed on the statue of an orc on the altar. The statue was less than a metre tall but it looked quite lifelike, its entirety made of pitch black rock. The surface was sparkling all over, and upon closer inspection he felt a strange power within it. This was the same power he had felt in the altar of the bloodstone orcs, likely the spirit of the orcs' ancestor.

Richard stowed the statue away; this was the entire reason he

had attacked this camp. He did take a round through the camp, but there wasn't anything else of value.

Zendrall grew busy once more. The tribe had two strong level 13 warriors who could become warriors of darkness, and he was preparing to convert them. This had become a normal state of affairs. The necromancer was occupied at the end of every battle.

While everyone was busy clearing the battlefield, Richard took out a map and marked out the topology of the camp and its surroundings. A month ago this map was practically blank, but now there were many marks on it.

An hour later, Richard brought his troops with him as he disappeared into the crimson dusk. He left the camp in ruins, with only slightly more than a dozen lucky survivors. It would be difficult for this tribe to survive now; their only choice would be to merge with others.

As a human, Richard wouldn't be concerned with the survival of the tribe. Were he in an orc kingdom, nobody would care about his own fate.

The orcs of Faelor paid great attention to ancestral worship, quite similar to the ones back in Norland. Almost every established tribe had a sacrificial altar, making them a target for Richard. Although they'd met some tribes in the initial stages of their expedition, he hadn't given the order to attack. The invitation from the Golden Warflag group had cleared the last of his hesitation.

Another two camps were wiped out in the next few days, and Richard took the idols they worshipped. He still remembered that the broodmother required such objects, and Flowsand was quite interested in them as well. Well, she was interested in anything related to magic or the divine.

The Bloodstained Lands turned out to be quite fertile. Richard would look for orcs or desert people if he needed idols, and slavers

if he needed soldiers. Most slaving teams he met ended up forfeiting all their slaves to his control, while the slavers became warriors of darkness under Zendrall's control. If he needed gold he often met up with caravans. Even though most of the time he brokered a deal and bought their goods, it would be at or near cost price. As long as one could defeat their enemies, the Bloodstained Lands were a haven with everything one desired.

Even though he had only been here for a short time, Richard was starting to feel that such a life would never end.

Book 2, Chapter 100

Frontier

Still out on the expedition, Richard received an unexpected piece of news from the Golden Warflag.

It had come from Marvin, the fallen cleric who had been sent out to negotiate with the Sequoia Kingdom. Despite not showing any interest for a month, the Direwolf Duke's attitude had changed greatly in recent times. He'd granted Marvin an audience, promising protection for Richard and his party.

Since Richard didn't have any official title or rank, Marvin had crafted a fake history for him. He claimed Richard was from an ancient clan, finding a dead clan from eons ago and using its name. Such things were quite common in the Sequoia Kingdom, so all he needed was some gold to make it work.

An empty nobility like that was meaningless, even if one's ancestors had ruled entire duchies. Nevertheless, the Direwolf Duke conferred upon Richard the title of frontier knight, allowing him to choose a village on the border as his fief.

This was the foundation of any noble clan. Even though his title would not pass from generation to generation, the point of the title was to legally allow him to expand. A frontier knight would be the rightful ruler of any territory they conquered.

In all of recorded history, frontier knights were the cornerstone of human expansion. They were always on the frontlines, allowing the race to slowly conquer the mainland. Frontier knights decided themselves how much land they would conquer. In theory, they could become the rulers of large countries as long as they earned it all through battle.

The title from the Direwolf Duke had actually opened up two paths for Richard. He could attack east towards their long-time

rivals in the Whiterock Dukedom, or head west and conquer the foreign races of the Bloodstained Lands.

Baron Fontaine became Richard's biggest supporter. He had wealth and fertile land, able to provide sufficient supplies as long as Richard could afford them. At the same time, he would be a point where Richard could dispose all of his stolen goods. The slave output would be quite high in the initial stages of development, something the Baron was quite interested in.

The Direwolf Duke obviously had his own reasons for his generosity. At the end of the letter, Marvin indicated that the man wanted a rune of his own in return for everything he'd done. Memories of his transactions in Bluewater coursed through Richard's mind as soon as he read that; it gave him just a glimpse into the complicated relationship the Oasis shared with the neighbouring human kingdoms.

The last line of the letter was that Marvin had levelled up. Having completed his task he'd unexpectedly been granted more divine grace, growing to level 7. Richard pondered about that for a while before telling Flowsand, but the latter did not seem surprised.

In addition to picking his fief, Richard had to clearly state the scope of his expansion. As such, Richard wrote a short reply that picked a small village in the west of the Sequoia Kingdom, demarcating a scary scope of land for expansion.

He wanted the Bloodstained Lands and the barbarians' ancestral plains!

Having sent the letter out, Richard left the Golden Warflag supply base once more, leading his team out to explore more of the depths of the Bloodstained Lands.

The Bloodstained Lands were full of dangers, piles of white bone littered all over the place. Richard had long since grown used to scenes of death and massacre, having witnessed several caravans

being plundered by horse bandits and what the aftermath was. As such, he wasn't shocked at discovering the remnants of a battlefield up ahead. He reined in his horse, waving for a novice knight to take a small group of desert people and investigate the scene.

The knight returned not long after, asking Richard to look at the scene himself. The battle had occurred at least ten days ago, and the corpses on the floor had already rotted away. Scavengers could be seen circling the battlefield, and a group of vultures was feasting on a corpse. Only when Richard's horses were within ten metres did the birds fly away, but they still continued to circle in the sky.

Richard slowly swept his gaze across the entire battlefield. This had been a violent fight of a large scale, the flag and crests of one side showing that they were guards of the Bloodstained Lions, one of the top merchant groups in the land. More than 300 guards were left behind as corpses, a formidable army that would have struck fear in the hearts of the toughest bandit groups.

In the midst of the battlefield was the wreckage of ten carriages, completely destroyed by heavy weaponry to leave all kinds of goods scattered on the floor. A large portion of their goods was different kinds of ore, which were both expensive and rare. With more than ten such vehicles carrying this to the human kingdoms, it would have been worth tens of thousands of coins.

Around the carriages were more than a hundred corpses, these ones looking like merchants. They were all laid in various positions; some had resisted, some had tried to escape, while others had begged for mercy. Whatever they did, they all met the same cruel fate. Based on the number of corpses, Richard was sure that there were no survivors.

Having inspected the corpses and goods, what struck Richard the most was that there were no containers of food or water on the scene. He quickly concluded that the attackers had only gone for supplies and whatever few items had the most value. They weren't

interested in this heavy ore.

Even with the Red Cossack flag, such a caravan would have given Richard some serious consideration. However, the whole caravan had been reduced to corpses, and what about the enemies? Did they escape unscathed? Could it be that an unknown force followed the same custom as they did, collecting the remains of their dead?

It was then that his gaze landed on a knight adorned in black armour. This knight was extremely big, seemingly larger and stronger even than barbarians. The heavy armour on him was at least a few hundred kilograms, the quality allowing him to go toe to toe with even Medium Rare. Given such a sturdy body, he undoubtedly couldn't be carried by any ordinary horse.

A short distance from the knight was another corpse, this one of a horse that was at least a metre longer than the knight himself. This warhorse had two large fangs sticking out of its mouth, with spikes of varying length jutting out all over its body. The frightening creature had traces of dried blood on its hooves and spikes, and a severed arm was held in its mouth.

Only such a horse had the strength to carry that black knight.

More than ten weapons were pierced into the knight's body, tens of corpses scattered around him in a circle. It was obvious that they had all been killed by a single fierce enemy. The horse's body was pierced by a few polearms as well, and more than ten of the caravan guards were laid across it.

Despite being dead for so many days, the knight and his horse still gave off an intimidating aura. Jackals, vultures... not even insects were willing to come close. Forget the corpses themselves, everything in a range around the bodies was still in good condition.

Richard frowned. This black knight gave him a very uneasy feeling.

Book 2, Chapter 101

Discovery

Richard jumped off his warhorse, making his way to the body of the black knight. He kicked the half-decomposed guards away and kneeled down, turning him to show his face.

The man's boorish face resembled that of a barbarian, still stuck in the scowl he'd had before his death. His hair was cut neatly like a soldier, unlike the unkempt style of most of the powerhouses of this plane. He was mostly human, but certain characteristics made it evident that he had the blood of other races in him as well. Be it strength, endurance, or energy, it was evident he was top notch.

Precision and Richard's own artistic intuition was sending him some very strange information. This mixture of bloodlines actually maximised the man's potential, and the process itself could be considered perfect. It made him think back to records in the Deepblue of a way to craft a mixed-blood race. This fellow in front of him seemed to be the fruit of such methods.

The marks of the battle made it obvious that he was around level 15, but be it his armour or his weaponry they were all standard issue. The rest of the battlefield also indicated that he was no more than an ordinary knight in his team. What kind of team was made of level 15 knights?

Even in Norland such a team would be an elite force of a powerful family, second only to rune knight platoons.

Richard stood up and waved his hands, motioning for ten desert people to come over. He wanted them to strip the black knight of all his weapons, and take his armour off as well. A dark and gloomy aura was constantly radiated by the corpse, making even the fearless desert people show signs of fright. Their hands were trembling as they took the weapons away.

Once three of them got the heavy breastplate off, another took a machete and cut open his flaxen clothing to expose the knight's chest.

Richard suddenly lost his breath.

On the greening chest was the lifelike tattoo of a bear's head. The bottom part of the head went quite deep, with a complicated magic array inscribed on it. This array was extremely familiar to Richard, he could draw it with his eyes closed.

It was a rune!

Richard was certain that nothing even vaguely similar to runes existed on Faelor. Even if someone successfully drew a magic array on someone's body, this was rare and only performed on powerhouses. Only those of a high level here had the carrying capacity for runes. The mages of Faelor didn't even know of the concept, unaware of how to calculate the carrying capacity for a rune.

These seemingly basic magic principles had been established in Norland for a long time. They were drafted by more than ten legendary mages, who had spent centuries slowly perfecting the craft.

Richard didn't need any kind of test to conclude that the rune on this corpse wasn't from this plane, and he was also 90% sure that it came from Norland. This was a standard rune on Norland—elementary defense. It would reduce the damage its wearer took by roughly 10%. Even if other planes also had runecrafting heritage, it wasn't possible for them to replicate a rune in such detail.

Flowsand stood up as well, extremely astonished by the sight of the rune.

The filth and smell of the corpse had long slipped Richard's mind. He snatched the machete from the warrior, cutting up all of the knight's undershirt. Sure enough, he saw a standard strength

rune on each arm.

His expression turned ugly, “A bearguard knight of the Schumpeters...” His subconscious occupied, the words coming from his mouth were actually in Norlandic— a language he hadn’t used in a long time.

Flowsand was puzzled, “They look similar, but how can you be sure? Many knight troops use bears as their trademark.”

Richard pointed to the corpse’s arms and chest, “Two strength runes and one defense rune, this is a standard issue set for the bearguard knights.”

“Ph...” Flowsand still had some doubts.

“This knight has special breeding. He has the blood of giants, barbarians, and direbears in him. This breeding can only be found in Schumpeter warriors. I’m sure this is a bearguard knight!”

Looking at the knight’s corpse on the floor, a shadow flashed past Flowsand’s face.

Rune knights differed based on the rune sets they used, but the threshold to form a rune knight was very high. This made many noble houses vie for the creation of ‘rune knight-like’ knights, those that had three or four runes. Although these groups couldn’t match up to true rune knights at all, the lower threshold meant far more of them could be made. This allowed a family to quickly raise its powers, using elementary or grade 2 runes alone.

And thus, many powerful families had accumulated forces that were unique to them, the bearguard knights of the Schumpeters being one of these. The strength of the Schumpeters did not lie in their runes, instead in the careful breeding of their bearguard knights. The knights were gifted with immense strength and endurance, benefiting greatly from the runes they were given. Alongside their specially bred magic horses, the bearguard knights were known for unparalleled strength in their charges.

As a saint runemaster in the making, Richard naturally had a deep understanding of the existing rune combinations, even this simple yet unique combination used by the bearguard knights. Every bearguard knight was around level 15, and even though they couldn't compare to true rune knights who were level 16 or above the Schumpeters had less than 30 rune knights but close to 200 in the bearguard. If the entire groups were pit against each other, there would hardly be any difference.

Flowsand frowned, "Why would a bearguard knight appear here?"

Richard's eyes narrowed, "If it's the Schumpeters, it can't be anything good. If they sent bearguard knights over, they should be aware of the coordinates and strength limit of this plane."

"EVERYONE STAY PUT!" Richard roared, "NOBODY IS TO MOVE!"

Once that was done, Richard brought Gangdor, Waterflower, and the trolls along on an inspection of the aftermath. A lot of time having passed, the traces of the battle were unclear. They had also arrived in a large crowd earlier, with many horses amongst them. It would be difficult to tell what happened before.

However, Tiramisu discovered a hoofprint a few hundred metres away. Judging from the positions of the corpses and broken carriages, this seemed to be where the knights had attacked from.

Richard went around the location once, calculating that there were roughly seventy bearguard knights. Furthermore, at the front of the formation were several claw marks, looking like the print of a large beast that was about ten metres long.

"Do you know who did this?" Richard pointed at the giant claw marks.

Flowsand shook her head, "I spend most of my time cooped up in the church. I rarely met outsiders."

Richard frowned. Whoever it was, leading the bearguard knights was no simple task. However, he had limited understanding of the nobility of Norland, and wasn't able to tell who it was based on the few claw marks. Just like the Archeron death camps, every other family had its own secret source of power. Richard had spent too little time in Faust, and he'd spent most of that time reading up on interplanar battles. He didn't have the time to read up on the hierarchy of the Schumpeters.

Having circled the location thrice, Richard returned to the dead knight, deep in thought. "It's no coincidence that Schumpeters are in this plane. It's likely that they're here for us."

Having said that, Richard looked at Flowsand with meaning, "The great Dragon of Eternity and Light collected such a generous sacrifice from me. Why didn't he tell me when he changed the plane I was going to, and that other families would be coming here as well?"

Flowsand spread out her hands, "The turbulent time flow has nothing to do with the Eternal Dragon. As for the other families, you need to know that the old dragon is a cunning and greedy cheat. Never take its promises to heart."

Listening to this evaluation, Richard's eyebrows twitched uncontrollably. However, he did not interrupt her so she continued, "What's important is this: what are we going to do now?"

"What else can we do?" A dark shadow flashed across Richard's face, and he spoke in an icy tone, "We find a way to kill them! Give me a knife!"

A desert warrior who was nearby handed Richard a knife, and he kneeled over by the side of the corpse and proceeded to use it to cut the three runes out. He then placed them in a box.

"What is this for?" Flowsand asked, unsure of Richard's use for them.

Richard waved the box in his hand, “If I make a few alterations this rune can still be used, even if its performance degrades a little. It should still be alright to just sell it to someone else in Faelor.”

Having said that, Richard hopped on his horse and asked for his army to gather up. He had the desert warriors who were familiar with the land clean all traces of the battlefield, taking them along the direction of the bearguard knights’ trail. This would be the easiest way to avoid being found.

Book 2, Chapter 102

Massacre

Twilight Oasis was the largest oasis in the deserts of the Bloodstained Lands, amongst the best in the entire region. Two streams running down from the barbarian plains merged into its basin, forming a huge lake. If the fertile land nearby was fully developed, it could support a hundred thousand people.

However, this potential to generate wealth made the lands nearby highly contested, resulting in few areas being properly developed. They were still mainly reliant on merchants travelling in from the distant human kingdoms for food.

Similar to Bluewater, a mix of individuals and groups with varying degrees of power ruled Twilight Oasis together. Unlike Bluewater, however, the hierarchy here was always in flux. There was no stable power structure, every change in leadership accompanied by the spilling of fresh blood.

One normal night, a thick mist rose from the lake and spread all around the oasis. The inhabited parts of the city nearby was completely covered with fog, with the situation even worse in areas with vegetation. In some places, one couldn't see past ten metres. However, such fog was a common occurrence in Twilight Oasis.

Thick fog and a dark night... These were the perfect conditions for murder. This was why deadly situations were common in Twilight Oasis.

Once the fog covered a substantial area, a large black-armoured knight slowly stepped out. He was of massive build, with magical armour and heavy weapons making him seem like a wargod. More such knights stepped out of the thick fog one by one, forming the frontlines of a battle. Every single one remained silent, pointing their weapons towards the ground. Outside of the occasional

squeaks of armour rubbing against itself, nothing else could be heard.

Two mages threaded their way through the group of knights, making their way to the front of the group. They were fully covered up in mage robes, the hoods drawn over their heads making it impossible to identify them.

The fog in a fifteen metre radius suddenly gave way, as a large dark manticore descended from the sky to silently land in front of the knights. It restlessly circled the area once it landed, releasing low snarls.

Its appearance caused the bearguard knights to grow restless, while the mounts nearby were agitated. Even the knights themselves couldn't calm the creatures down.

Sinclair, seated atop the manticore, pounded hard on its head. Her small fist was surprisingly powerful, the collision sending the creature's head burrowing into the ground. The manticore managed to get its big head out with some difficulty, but remained subdued thereafter. It was afraid of moving about wildly like before.

Looking at the outline of the buildings in the distance, Sinclair's breathing grew faster as her face flushed red. The great mages were familiar with her style, knowing this meant she was about to erupt. They started chanting spells in response, buffing the knights and their mounts. It was like the powerful beasts had been given an extra fang.

Sinclair was clearly gritting her teeth, her face contorting. It was strange to see her refined and exquisite face distorted in this manner, as if she had two different faces. She spoke through gritted teeth, "Oi, you bastards. Will you listen obediently and not rebel?"

"That..." one of the mages carefully picked his words, "It's hard to avoid this. There's so many fools on secondary planes."

Sinclair nodded her head vigorously, her eyes growing redder and redder until even her sclera was completely crimson. She suddenly whipped out a pair of daggers, letting out a resounding shriek, “KILL ANYONE WHO DARES TO GO AGAINST ME! ATTACK!”

The bearguard knights lifted their weapons one after the other, urging their mounts on as they made their way forth without hurry. They slowly sped up, accumulating power as they approached the peak of their charge. The combined acceleration eventually erupted forth with unrelenting strength; they were impossible to stop at full charge!

Sinclair bounded off her manticore, wrapping herself within her cape in mid-air. She disappeared into the night sky, already at the edge of the city when she was back.

“KNEEL!” she commanded in a shrill voice.

The knight in charge of the garrison flew into a rage, bellowing, “We belong to the Golden Warflag! Where did you come from, you...”

Only the first few words were audible, his voice growing softer and softer as he spoke. His last few words even disappeared into the night wind. He wanted to lower his head, but couldn't seem to do so. The world started to spin, eventually being blanketed in darkness.

Sinclair slid past the knight, her black cape fluttering in the night sky as wind blades were shot out of her cape. These wind blades were unimaginably sharp, cutting off the heads of the patrolling knights without issue.

She had no intention to use her knife in dealing with this mix of soldiers. Her silhouette appeared and disappeared everywhere on the streets, and in a flash she was concealed within the layers of buildings far away. A bloodbath ensued wherever she appeared, forming a river of blood on the ground. Almost half of the fog-

covered city was quickly reeking of blood.

A dark shadow flitted across the sky yet again, and the manticore silently landed in the middle of the city. It crushed a building in front of it to the ground, exposing the room within.

Tens of knights were sleeping in these quarters, the sheer pace of these events meaning half of them were still in their dreams. Only two were quick enough to jump off their beds, but unfortunately they were greeted by a plume of poisonous fog from the manticore's tail.

It was as if this fog had a life of its own. It enveloped the entire room almost instantly, condensing into a vapour as it left no corner untouched.

The knights all swayed about in the fog, quickly falling to the ground while frozen in stance. Their bodies twitched uncontrollably, bubbles forming on their skin as if their blood was boiling. They soon grew unrecognisable, the bones and flesh melting into a heap of boiling liquid wrapped in skin.

A short sword that had been suspended on a wall suddenly dropped down, piercing a body. It was as if it had fallen on a bag of water and cut it, leaving a flood of black liquid gushing out. The person instantly shrivelled up.

The thunderous sound of hooves rang out at the city's borders. The bearguard knights had rushed in at that exact moment, promptly setting about a widespread massacre!

Everywhere the knights went was filled with fresh blood and broken limbs. The buildings in the oasis were no match for the massive weapons of the knights, almost seeming like they were made of paper. The violent black knights razed everything to the ground, burying anyone within alive.

Two powerful saints normally kept watch over Twilight Oasis, but only one was present in the city tonight. Sensing danger, he

woke up from his slumber and was about to alert the necessary people, but he was unable to escape his own fate.

As he was gazing out his bedroom window into the city and trying to make sense of the sight before him, his odour was like a lighthouse in the dark that attracted Sinclair to the scene. She moved about in stealth, mounting a lethal attack. In a sudden and quick confrontation, she'd gotten herself a bland but still palatable heart.

Without the powerful saint's protection, the attack on Twilight Oasis became a one-sided massacre. The fight lasted an entire hour, before things finally started to settle down. More than a thousand dead bodies lay on the floor all over, causing the thick fog that shrouded the entire city to be tainted by the putrid smell of blood.

However, this fog had helped the inhabitants as much as it had the invaders. Many had utilised its cover to escape the city, bounding out towards the rest of the Bloodstained Lands.

Book 2, Chapter 103

Massacre(2)

Twilight Oasis had nearly ten thousand residents, and the bearguard knights were exhausted by the time the entirety of the resistance was cut down. The manticore roared out from the city centre, a call to gather all of Sinclair's troops. The knights all abandoned any dead or dying prey, making their way towards the location.

At the same time, a mage's voice amplified by magic spread throughout the entire city, "Everyone, put down your weapons! Anyone found bearing arms will be killed on the spot!"

However, the mage's words were of no use. Those who would not submit were already dead or escaped.

The bearguard knights dispersed once more, going from house to house to chase everyone and have the entire city gather at the square. Everyone who saw the huge manticore shivered uncontrollably; this creature was thrice as large as a thunder lizard, the largest beast of the Bloodstained Lands. One of the ladies started screaming uncontrollably, and was immediately pulled out of the group and executed right away.

Sinclair stood on the manticore's head, smirking innocently without a trace of guilt on her face. Her lips were a dazzling dark red, the same crimson as blood. She swept her gaze across the entire square, causing everyone to shiver in fear. They felt as though she was staring directly at them,

"My name is Sinclair, and from this day onwards I shall be your master. Your life, and death, will rest solely in my hands. I love peace, obedience, and pretty things. Please me and you may live, dare to resist even the slightest..."

She waved her hand lazily, and an ordinary-looking middle-aged

man flew out of the crowd. Her silhouette flashed away from the top of the manticore, suddenly appearing behind the man. A quick glimmer of her knife later, she was back on the manticore's head.

Thick, viscous blood now stained her daggers, one of which was longer than the other. They seemed to have life of their own, the blood rolling at the edge of the blade. Not a single drop dripped down even after a long time.

“... And this will be the result.” She glanced at her hands, and a quick jerk later the fresh blood flew out to leave pitch black blades. She shot a look of disgust at the middle-aged man, speaking icily, “Just a piece of level 13 trash, and you dare play tricks on me?”

The middle aged man fell to the floor, unable to get up for a while. It took him a lot of difficulty to prop up his upper body, pointing a shaking finger at Sinclair, but no matter how much he tried not a single syllable left his mouth. A red line suddenly appeared on his face, his body falling apart into four pieces even as blood and organs fell to the floor.

Some people had still been stirred up till then, but faced with the prospect of death they covered their mouths to muffle their weeping. Sinclair's gaze passed over the few of them, but she didn't take any further action. Only the two mages knew that this was not mercy, just laziness. It was now time for her to enjoy and entertain herself.

“You, you, you... And you, get out here!” Sinclair pointed twenty people out one by one, and her targets wasted no time in coming out to form a line. All of them were shivering with fear.

Everyone selected was young and good-looking, with an equal number of men and women. Seeing the small number the mages knew that Sinclair had grown tired of the slaughter. Even though she wanted to indulge herself now, she would not go overboard.

She randomly pointed at a grand, tall building in the area, having the bearguard knights take a few people over to clean the hall. She

then shouted at the people she had selected, “Strip!”

The youths hesitated for a brief moment. Although none of them dared to disobey Sinclair, it was still hard for them to strip naked in front of an entire city’s worth of people.

In that mere moment of hesitation, one of the mages shot out an arcane missile from his fingertips, directly striking a young lady who was standing completely still and knocking her out of the formation. The bearguard knights by the side twirled their giant hammers, starting to smash the young lady to a pulp. It was like a fruit was being squashed, leaving blood and flesh flying onto the youths in the line. This instantly caused them to start screaming.

“Shut up!” The mage’s words silenced a majority of the men and women, but two of the young ladies couldn’t stop themselves. As such, they were dragged out of the line as well, their throats slit.

“Our mistress has no patience, and she doesn’t like noise. All you have to do is clearly listen to every command, and do exactly as you are told. Now, strip! If you still don’t, we’ll choose a new batch!” The mage’s voice was as cold as the northern wind. If a new batch were chosen, the rest of this batch would share the same fate as the three young ladies.

The square immediately fell silent. There was no more resistance, no protests, and no attempts to escape.

Sinclair then chose three more young ladies to make up for the shortfall, and this time the youths stripped as fast as they could. They then awaited their fate, trembling all the while.

The hall had been cleared by this time. Sinclair chased all her naked toys inside, starting to laugh maliciously. She took off all her clothes as well, leaving what little black armour she had on the streets as she sashayed into the big hall.

She looked around her surroundings before pointing her finger at a handsome young man, “You! Come here and show me all your

skills. Make sure I enjoy it... Don't play any tricks, do it now!"

The young man's mind suddenly blanked out at her chiding, and in his state of extreme panic his manhood naturally withered. Sinclair was immediately enraged; she shot her hand into his chest, crushing his heart in a single go. His body flew out with a wave of her hand, landing at the centre of the city square. Her sharp roar could be heard from the door, "Useless piece of trash!"

She then grabbed a weak young lady, ruthlessly giving her two slaps on the ear that made her bleed from her mouth and nose. She then threw her on the floor and got on top of her. A trembling youth then walked up at her instruction, pressing himself into her from behind. In the blink of an eye, the inside of the hall had become a world of debauchery that reeked of blood.

It was only then that the people gathered at the square were allowed to disperse. Two mages started patrolling the regions where violent clashes had occurred, taking stock of the situation.

Even with the saint taken care of by Sinclair, Twilight Oasis had more than a thousand warriors with no shortage of those of high level. As such, the battle was quite hard fought. Five of their numbers had died in battle.

They discovered another knight down in a corner of the city, unable to get up. Two long spears and a two-handed sword were stuck to his body, and a terrifying hole in his back revealed some of his innards.

The mage who found him inspected his injuries, eventually shaking his head. Thus, another bearguard knight came over and used a dagger to slit the wounded knight's throat, ending his misery.

Now, only 64 bearguard knights remained.

The mage sighed. The cruellest part when one was establishing a foothold in a foreign plane was at the start. Without the proper

channels of communication and a priest's magic, each metre of land could only be acquired through a sacrifice of lives and gold.

If they were still in Norland, the knight's life could have been saved. However, all they could do in this plane was watch him die.

A priest would rather die than heal a follower of another religion, much less a planar intruder. Every true god promised this to their followers— if one died at the hands of an intruder, they would earn the right to enter the god's divine kingdom. Their soul would be granted eternal life, regardless of past sins and faith.

What these worshippers didn't realise was that death at Sinclair's hands would not free their souls. No, they only became food for her manticore.

Book 2, Chapter 104

Search

It took two days and two nights for Sinclair to finally come out of that hall that reeked of blood and other liquids, finally done with her revelry. Black flames lit up all over her body, burning away all the filth covering it. This was soulfire, containing far greater power than one could imagine. And judging by the number of dead bodies lying back in the hall, it was needless to say what fuelled these flames. Soulfire was normally colourless, but with how tainted Sinclair was these flames were a depthless black.

As Sinclair was putting on her clothes and wearing her armour once more, the two mages who had completed their tasks stood at the side. They did not avoid the sight of her seductive body, but they kept their behaviour in check and didn't gaze at her with intent either.

One of them opened up a map, "We obtained many maps from this raid. I've already marked out important places in the Bloodstained Lands, please have a look."

Sinclair grunted in agreement. She scanned the map, pointing out a spot that was marked as an oasis, "It looks like there are a lot of people here, let's head there next. How many fighters can we assemble?"

"According to our preliminary estimations, there are about 500 people qualified to be soldiers," the other mage replied.

Sinclair nodded, "Give them a weapon each, and a set of armour. Hmm... no, half a set will be enough, and have them follow. Ah wait, 500 is too few, give anyone who can walk a weapon, we head out tomorrow morning to conquer a new oasis! They'll be first in line."

The two mages exchanged looks, and one of them spoke up, "If

we keep doing things like that, my Lady, we'll soon become the enemies of the entire plane."

"Haha! Are you saying that you're here in this plane to make friends?" Sinclair asked sarcastically.

"That's not what I meant, my Lady! This plane isn't the one we intended to visit, and those amongst its ranks are very powerful. Its rumoured that there are even legendary beings here, though we cannot verify that.

"We've come to know that this plane has far more gods than we originally intended for. If we get caught by the powerhouses of the plane..." The mage didn't complete his sentence, but the message was clear.

The rich and powerful families of Norland, the ones with floating islands to their name, all had legendary beings amongst their ranks that formed a deterrent to anyone else aiming to attack them. But this was a different plane, not Norland. Should a legendary being appear here, everyone would be dead.

"Legendary powerhouses? At level 18? Bah, that's just like their saints. They boast about such meagre power, I don't know where they learned to call themselves that," Sinclair said mockingly, as if it wasn't a problem at all.

The other mage tried convincing her as well, "My Lady, our original aim was to get rid of Richard. Now that we've come to an unfamiliar plane, we can put that aside. This is a mature plane that is abundant in resources, quite similar to Norland as well. Our role now is to be pioneers; as long as we return safely to Norland and give them the coordinates of this plane, it will be a huge achievement. The Schumpeters' strength will be boosted greatly in the next ten or so years, and your status will eventually rise with that. It isn't our business to get rid of the powerhouses of this plane... We should let the family's rune knights take care of that."

Sinclair grunted, gloom clouding her face, "So you're saying I

should let Sisley finish conquering this place?”

The mage’s body trembled, and he immediately replied, “Even if she does, my Lady, your contributions will far exceed hers. Discovering a new plane is the most important thing. Also, if she does a poor job of it she’ll have no recourse.”

Sinclair understood that everything the mage said was true. Her expression grew less menacing, but her finger stubbornly remained pointed at the oasis on the map, “This place looks interesting. We’ll follow the original plan and set out tomorrow, we’re taking this place down!”

The other mage contemplated for a while, eventually deciding to speak up, “Your highness, that oasis is comparable to this one. If we start a war, we’ll need to deploy the bearguard knights. There aren’t many knights under your control right now, and we don’t have any clerics. Please... Think it over the soonest possible!”

Sinclair waved her hand impatiently, retorting, “Enough! I already know! Only a few of them died, what’s the big deal anyway? It wasn’t easy to get away from those old rascals, of course I’ll have to celebrate and enjoy myself! After all, the more people I kill the stronger my baby becomes. Don’t take the people of this plane too seriously, they’re all barbarians. They’ve never even heard of runes, what kind of power can they even have? I just killed someone who called themselves a saint, and he was only level 16. Stop talking so much, I know what’s going on. Once there’s less than 40 left I’ll get serious.”

The two mages were rendered helpless, left with no choice but to return to what they were doing prior to the discussion.

.....

Towards the south of the path Sinclair intended to take, Richard was leading his own troops north. They had already entered the northern parts of the Bloodstained Lands.

At nightfall, they chose a place sheltered from the wind to set up camp and rest. Richard took out his map, thinking things over under the magic light. There were two paths marked on the map: the one he was taking and the one tracing the Schumpeters' path.

He followed the traces of the bearguard knights, extending from north to south as he circled some key regions to search. The bearguard knights were quite distinctive—their horses crushed rocks under their hooves, so even with more than ten days having passed it was possible to find traces of their presence. He extended the currently known route towards the south, winding up near Twilight Oasis. Even further south were Saak Oasis and Saltwater Valley, both occupied by a mix of different races.

Towards the north, he had already found three areas that had been destroyed by the bearguard knights as well as the remnants of a caravan. The Schumpeters hadn't left a single soul alive, with traces of mass murder in inhabited regions. There were five dead knights on their path, allowing Richard to recover seven more runes. The rest of the runes were either destroyed in battle or rotted beyond recognition alongside their owners.

He took a look at the southern path, understanding that the three inhabited places there wouldn't be lucky enough to escape their fate. However, Twilight Oasis and Saak Oasis both were rather strong, with powerful saints watching over them. Even if this plane's saints were two levels lower than in Norland, the bearguard knights wouldn't be able to take the oases without a fight. The more these bearguard knights were weakened, the safer Richard would become. He was more worried about these killers from Norland than the military forces of this plane.

Book 2, Chapter 105

Search(2)

Flowsand sat down beside Richard, looking at the map as well. She then pointed at the north, “Once we reach this point, we’ll have left the Bloodstained Lands and set foot on the borders of the Iron Triangle Empire. They have great power, but many of the nobles there have conflicts with each other; even the imperial family itself isn’t harmonious. On top of that, their territory is so extensive that the control at the borders is extremely lax.

“And look here. This is a mountain region full of forests, stretching into the distance without any sign of human habitation. The Schumpeters’ base probably ended up somewhere in this place.”

“Very likely,” Richard nodded, “But the chances of us finding a Lighthouse of Time that’s still lit there are rather slim. I feel like the Schumpeters were lost just like us, or they would’ve sent proper rune knights instead of the bearguard knights. Bearguard knights are only suitable to clean up inferior planes that cap at level 16 or 18.”

“It doesn’t matter whether it’s still lit. If the base was lost in spacetime like ours, that’s even better. There’s bound to be a large amount of the power of time remaining there, what I need most at this moment. Once we find the base, I’m sure I can advance to level 10. At that moment, my title will be boosted as well.”

“Your title? Daybreak? I didn’t know a title from the Eternal Dragon had special abilities.” Richard was very surprised. He’d originally thought that the title was simply to impress others, like those given to emperors or other monarchs throughout history.

“Of course not, the Dragon of Eternity and Light is not that senseless,” Flowsand said with a smile.

Richard creased his brows and replied, “A while ago someone told me it was just an unreliable greedy dragon.”

“Indeed, but the old dragon isn’t senseless.”

“Old dragon... Flowsand, I really doubt your devotion towards your religion. How did you even become a cleric?” Even if they’d already shared a bed, Richard discovered he was only starting to get to know this girl.

“It’s not like the Eternal Dragon cares about your faith, all it wants are offerings.”

“And your title?”

“A title is nothing great, just an acknowledgement of talent and capability. If the person with the title can’t present enough offerings to satisfy the thing, it will void the title. So you need to work hard, Richard! I’m depending on you!”

“Really?” Richard was astonished.

“Of course not!” Flowsand smiled lightly.

“Flowsand!” Richard growled in frustration. Intentionally or not she was leading him on, and the only way to vent his frustration was to pin this young lady down. She took every single opportunity to frustrate him.

After an intense ‘battle’, Richard lay down on the blanket as his gasps slowed down to regular breathing once more. On the other hand, Flowsand curled up in his arms like a feline. He wasn’t just venting his frustration; he’d accumulated a lot of fatigue and stress over the past several days. Right now his body felt hollow and drained, as if his marrow had been extracted, but his mind was now calm. As his stress dissipated, his thoughts grew clearer.

He huffed as he spoke, “To think they sent more than seventy bearguard knights over. The Schumpeters really have gone to all lengths with their capital.”

“It doesn’t seem like one family could afford to come up with this capital alone. No, I’m not saying that the Schumpeters don’t have the resources to do it, but it would be meaningless to spend this much on a potential threat instead of using it to expand their own power. However, if it was a collaboration between a few families it would be another matter altogether. Each family wouldn’t take out much alone, so it wouldn’t have any serious impact.”

“Just to deal with me? Is that necessary?” Richard creased his brows and asked.

“If it could eliminate a future saint runemaster, then it would definitely be necessary.”

Richard creased his brows once again, falling silent. He was already certain that he would become a grand runemaster once he reached level 12. As for becoming a saint runemaster, if he could finish the second set of the Savagery of Darkness series he could be considered to have met the basic requirements to start on the path. If one thought of it that way, he really was worth a lot.

Every plane was structured like a pyramid. The people at the top had the most resources, and the number of positions at every level was set in stone. A person’s status was only relative to others; if one wished to advance, they could only trample others as they climbed up the ladder. Although the methods were different for different people, the net effect was the same.

Richard sighed; he understood this truth as well. Although he hoped to empower himself instead of just trample over others, the positions at every level were fixed just like the floating islands of Faust. Every step he took forward was sure to trample over someone else, whether that was his intention or not.

He felt a wave of fatigue wash over him, so he closed his eyes and fell into slumber...

The next morning, Richard led his troops and set off to continue their journey. He found traces of the bearguard knights in the

marked areas, but he wasn't in a hurry to go north. Several kilometres east was a supply camp of the Golden Warflag.

Richard handed a few letters to the person in charge of the camp, asking for a caravan to bring them back to Bluewater Oasis.

One of the letters was written to Marvin, requesting him to urge the churches on the border of the Sequoia Kingdom to send troops into the Bloodstained Lands to suppress the foreign invaders. The rest of the letters were written to the agents of the forces he was familiar with in Bluewater, including Devon and Amon. He mentioned that he found traces of invaders in the middle-north of the Bloodstained Lands, and that these violent and diabolical intruders were heading south. It was possible they would rush all the way to Bluewater, so he wanted these old friends to step up their preventive measures to avoid losses. He also described in detail some of the distinctive traits of the bearguard knights.

He believed the news would spread quickly once his recipients read their letters. Then, the bearguard knights wouldn't just be facing scattered resistance and hurried attacks, but elite troops and well-trained warriors. The gazes of the powerhouses of this plane would be drawn to them, having them overlook a small and weak invading army like Richard's.

As for Baron Forza, people like him would just think they became a meal in the belly of a magical beast if he didn't show himself for a while. After all, the oracle from the God of Valour only assessed them to be an insignificant force. It wasn't even worth dispatching the central church's forces to deal with someone of such capability.

The only thing Richard needed at the moment was time. At the Bloodstained Lands, the two troops from Norland practically brushed past each other before they slowly grew further apart.

Book 2, Chapter 106

Waiting

Faelor had endured invasions from many foreign planes, but peace would eventually be restored every time. The two recent invasions weren't significant when compared to the threats of the past, only a small ripple in the long river of history. The only thing that mattered was that the plane would survive. As for the future, nobody would be able to tell.

However, a primary plane like Norland was never peaceful. The night view of Faust was as beautiful as ever, but Gaton's mood was nowhere close. Accompanied by two rune knights, he haughtily made his way to the Church of the Eternal Dragon. There he met with high priestess Ferlyn in a private room.

In the face of a bubbling volcano like Gaton, Ferlyn appeared resigned, "I truly am sorry, Lord Gaton, but I cannot contact Flowsand at this moment either. Although I'm unwilling to admit this, I have to say their party was likely lost in the streams of time. If luck is on their side, they might have appeared on an unknown plane."

She didn't say what would happen if it wasn't, but that was clear even without her speaking.

Gaton fixed his gaze on Ferlyn, his eyes blazing with fury as he spoke slowly, "We presented the Eternal Dragon with such a rare and precious offering, but in return we are lost in time?"

Ferlyn sighed and replied, "The Eternal Dragon was quite satisfied with the offering, bestowing generous blessings on the Archerons in response. However, mere mortals cannot comprehend a god's will. The endless planes are filled with mystery, the things we know and see are merely a drop in the ocean. Anything can happen when one is travelling through spacetime; you should know how common getting lost is."

“But the offerings were different!” Gaton replied coldly.

“I’ll admit that, but Richard has also received a lot of blessings. The will of the Dragon himself descended upon this plane during the ceremony. Nothing we already know applies, and anything is possible now. The best idea is to wait patiently,” Ferlyn said gently.

Gaton fell silent. He knew what Ferlyn said was right. During a regular ceremony, the Eternal Dragon only sent down a trace of his divine power to the church, and it would handle the sacrifice and blessings by itself. With the dragon descending itself, any previous rules didn’t matter anymore.

Gaton suddenly raised his head and looked at Ferlyn, uttering each and every word slowly, “This matter, did it occur entirely by chance or did someone interfere?”

Ferlyn thought for a moment before she answered, “I can’t tell.”

“Can’t tell...” Gaton smiled grimly, “Alright, I understand.”

He suddenly stood up, walking towards the door. He only turned his head back once he was about to leave, “I’m very grateful!”

Ferlyn smiled, “Waiting is often a wise choice.”

Gaton grinned in reply, “But the Archerons are always quick-tempered!”

From the beginning, they hadn’t talked further about the fates of Richard and Flowsand. They had both avoided the topic, and it was intentional.

.....

Atop the famed Snow Cliff at the east of Klandor, a young lady with her hair combed into many braids was sitting atop a large rock as she watched the sun set.

The side of the Snow Cliff facing the sea was a straight, precipitous drop that was over a thousand metres tall. True to its

name, the the precipice was made of rocks that were white as snow, while at the top was a meadow that was green as jade and smooth as velvet. It appeared extremely beautiful from the distance, a generous miracle nature had bestowed on all living things. It was one of Klandor's most famous sights, and a sacred place for the barbarian tribe.

According to tradition, every young warrior in the tribe was elected by the shrine to undergo trials once they gained enough strength. They would be tested to see whether they were qualified to inherit the sacred totems, and Snow Cliff was one of the trial venues. The young warriors who wished to prove their courage had to leap into the sea, and climb back up to the top once more. If they completed this process, they would be acknowledged as a successor of the sacred totems. Every warrior who even had the chance to participate at this trial would consider it the greatest glory of their lives.

Yet, the trial was extremely dangerous. The impact of a fall into the sea from so high would leave even the sturdy barbarians extremely frail, and the waters below had reefs everywhere. Those undergoing the trial had to pick the point where they dropped carefully from the hundred kilometre length of the cliff.

Once they fell, most didn't have the ability to climb back up anymore. However, these fearless warriors would not give up. They did their utmost to climb back up, using every bit of their strength before they fell back down once more. Before they fell these warriors would nail the ivory they wore onto the cliff as a testament to their courage. The higher a warrior climbed, the more valued he was by the tribe. In turn, this also meant he had a higher chance of inheriting the sacred totems.

As for the few who had successfully climbed back up to the top of the cliff, they had eventually becoming outstanding characters whose names resounded throughout history.

The young lady quietly gazed into the distance. It seemed like her

beauty blended into the scenery in front of her, the lines of pale totems on her cheeks adding a unique grace to her beauty.

The sun had just fallen below the horizon. Once the golden radiance banished completely, the only separation between the sky and the sea was a reddish afterglow that was both light and dark. They gradually joined into one, becoming a vast expanse of blackness.

The grassland on Snow Cliff gradually turned dull as the sky darkened. The wind grew stronger and colder, and an old man with a walking stick appeared at the end of the meadow. His movements seemed sluggish and weak, but he crossed numerous kilometres in the blink of an eye to appear behind the young lady.

“The elder is very worried about your situation, Your Highness.” The old man was Urazadzu, great shaman of the tribe. And of course, the young lady sat by the sea was Mountainsea. Despite having left Norland for a few years, the only change to her seemed that she was a little taller.

“How does he know about my situation? It’s not like he can talk to the Beast God,” Mountainsea replied lightly.

Urazadzu coughed heavily a few times, “... I can.”

“Such a trivial matter, do you really need to communicate with the Beast God?” the young lady asked.

The shaman threw a knowing look towards Mountainsea and shook his head, “Clearly, this is not a trivial matter.”

The young lady let out a sigh and replied, “Maybe. But he’s just an outsider who smells good.”

Urazadzu smiled, “He also doesn’t want money, and taps you on the head.”

A smile crept onto the young lady’s face as she remarked, “Yeah! Sometimes I wonder if I should just forget the promise, and snatch him like Mama did with father. I don’t see any chance of him

beating me anyway.”

“Elder Greyhawk has been working hard all these years, practising his martial skills. Do you know why?”

Mountainsea shook her head, her little braids flying all over as she did, “Even if Mama slept everyday without doing anything, he still won’t be able to beat her. He could train for 30 more years, and it still wouldn’t change.”

Urazadzu laughed hoarsely before continuing, “I believe the wise Greyhawk is aware of that, your Highness. Even with no hope at all, he still trains hard without slacking off.”

Mountainsea was sent deep into thought.

“Norland’s men are all very prideful. Although we feel like their pride is absolutely unreasonable, it can become a formidable force that propels them. They’re all very persistent. Even in the most desperate straits without any hope, they will never slack off. Only people like that can create miracles.”

“You mean Richard is someone like that too?”

“I’m sure you know what he is like better than I do,” Urazadzu replied, “However, you just can’t contact him now, am I right?”

Mountainsea nodded and extended her right hand, shaking it slightly. A string of ivory just like the one she gave Richard was wrapped around her wrist as well. As she shook her hand, the ivory pieces rattled against each other, making a crashing sound.

“Listen to this, the ivory tells me that he is still alive. I don’t know where he is now, but he’s definitely not on this plane. If he went to participate in a planar battle, then I should be able to know which plane he is on. Yet, I do not know. This means that he is lost.”

“It may be dangerous to be lost in time, but not all hope is lost. As long as he is alive, he can create miracles anytime. Do you hope for him to be a weakling who needs your help and support all the time,

or to become a fighter who performs miracles with a wave of his hand, just like the most outstanding warrior of our tribe?" the shaman asked.

The young lady thought for a moment, "Alright, I understand. I'll give him five more years. If he dies, I'll find Umur, Jagger, or any other fellow to hand down the sacred bloodline before heading off to avenge him. Even if he's still alive, I'll hand down the bloodline once five years are up."

The shaman sighed, not saying anything.

Mountainsea stood up, "I'm a little bored, and want some exercise. Wait for me, I'll be quick!"

The young lady then looked up to the sky as she let out a long, thunderous howl that reverberated into the distance. The long grass of the meadow collapsed and lay flat, rippling out layer by layer as the ground shook. Even as the howl still echoed, she had already leapt up and spread her arms open as she threw herself into the deep ocean!

A few minutes later, a drenched Mountainsea climbed up the side of the cliff. She shook her head hard, causing a lot of water to spray out of her hair. She then turned to Urazadzu, "Let's go, we'll return to the shrine!"

Book 2, Chapter 107

Wealth

In the midst of the endless void between the myriad planes was a small floating island.

This island was about a hundred square kilometres in size, with undulating terrain. At the west was a small snowy mountain with a sparkling lake, gentle waves breaking on the surface. Its water flowed down into a small stream, before branching out into more than ten small pools midway. These pools were clearly man-made — each was fashioned out of different materials.

If one looked from afar, the mountain was covered with dense mist and dew. Each pool shone with its own unique colour and glamour in the midst of this fog, the different glows making one feel like they were in a dreamland.

Any mage that stood atop the mountain would be surprised to find the sheer density of mana in the trickling stream, as if the lake was made of liquid mana. Just a sip of it was more effective than the strongest potion.

As this mana-filled water flowed into the various pools, it miraculously transformed into different elements. Air, fire, earth, light, electricity... It was as if each pool was a purifier that extracted elemental power from this mana. Most of the pools transformed this liquid into elemental power, but some even transformed it into various kinds of potions.

Sparkling crystals littered the bottom of the elemental pools. These were crystallised elemental power, sources of great amounts of mana. Sparkling crystals were scattered across the bottom of the element pools. This was the crystallisation of elemental power, the source of magic that also birthed the runecrafting, alchemy, and the entire world of magic.

At the bottom of the lake were heaps of magic crystals, some as tall as a person, that were continually expanding. The swelling water in the lake brushed up against them and then flowed across the land, taking away some of their mana even as new crystals formed at the bottom of the lake.

At the foot of the mountain and all around the perimeter of the island were exotic trees that formed a dense forest. Their trunks stood tall and straight, with no leaves on the countless golden branches that hung downwards like those of a willow.

The primal energy of the void generated explosive energies that constantly battered this small island, and these trunks stood tall and unyielding while their golden branches danced wildly in the commotion. The energies of these storms were like the sun and rain to these trees, eagerly absorbed by the branches. Whenever the energy storms passed through the forest ringing the island, almost all of the violent energy was devoured and depleted, causing it to die down to a gentle breeze.

Once these unusual trees took in enough energy, they radiated dazzling gold light. Since if these rays fell on the magical barrier protecting the island, repairing the portions that had been damaged and preventing the storms from completely ravaging it. The rest of the energy was sent into the interior via the roots, eventually converging at the lake atop the mountain where they transformed into pure mana.

This formed a cycle. Whenever the trees were depleted of the energy they had absorbed, they would lose the ability to repair the barrier and a part of it would break, forming a gaping hole that allowed the chaotic energy to enter. The storm would rush forth like water from an opened dam, destroying everything in its path. But then it would meet the dense forest, and they would absorb its energy to repair the barrier and stored some of it in the island.

The slope grew gentler the farther one went from the mountain, eventually ending up in a flat plain. Lakes and streams were

everywhere, nourishing the grass and flowers that were everywhere.

East of the plain was a rather magnificent tower, its seven stories making for a total height of fifty metres. The entire structure was made of blue magic crystals, the rarest and most precious material used in building magical structures. There were actually four materials that were better for such construction, but legend had it that only gods could afford to build palaces out of them.

A secondary building attached to the tower transformed the entire place into a palace. A stream of enchanted puppets constantly entered and exited the palace, occupied with their own tasks.

If one looked up at the sky, they would only see an endless black void. Splendid beams of light occasionally flitted across the sky; only experienced mages knew the terrifying destructive powers of those rays. They came from the random explosions of energy storms, always magnificent to look at with their myriad colours. Even an expansive mountain range would burst into a million colours and disappear into the void if this beam struck it.

A powerful will suddenly descended upon this island floating in this void, infusing it with vitality. The branches of the strange trees danced in the chaotic power of the energy storms, and the exquisite flowers in the fields of grass started to blossom and bear fruit. The speed of the enchanted puppets increased greatly as well.

A huge teleportation gate was activated at the field in front of the palace, countless magical symbols interweaving in the void. Sharon took big strides as she walked out of the portal, casually waving her hands to toss a few magic balls to the ground.

The balls exploded upon hitting the ground, revealing a number of elves. Silvermoon elves, high elves, dark elves, sun elves... it seemed like every elven species was represented in the tens of elves

present here. The elves were of all races, and be they male or female they were all beautiful. In an elven tribe, each would be an outstanding individual.

Mana poured out from under Sharon's feet, and she floated up three metres to tower over everyone else, even the puppets.

She waved her hands with vigour, her gown gently falling back to reveal a slender white arm, "You guys, go there! You lot, move all the boxes in room 3110 to the east side. You, you, and you, go activate the cages in a few of the bigger rooms— How many? You decide, if there's too many or too few, you'll get it from me!"

The legendary mage spoke with lightning speed. Everyone present set off in a frenzy, starting to fulfill their tasks. The puppets and elves all did their share, but it was still hard to finish the job.

However, there was peace amidst all this chaos. The puppets were surprisingly lively, possessing remarkable intelligence. The elves were rather skilled at their jobs as well, each at or above level 12. Even mages at that level wouldn't have trouble moving boxes that weighed several tens of kilograms, and those of the Deepblue were widely known for their strength.

Amidst all this chaos, the enormous gate was activated yet again. Sharon pointed at an exquisite brazier atop the gate, and it blazed with blue and gold flames. The energy surges on the other side grew quite intense.

Book 2, Chapter 108

Wealth(2)

A wave of mana blasted out of the portal with an explosion, carrying dozens of figures alongside it. In the lead was Gaton, decked out in full battle gear with the heavy sword that instilled fear in all enemies in his hand.

The surge of energy from the teleportation had been quite strong. Even though the people who came out were using their own energy to counter it, the wave of mana had left them dizzy and disoriented.

The stronger one was, the faster they would recover from the shock. Gaton was back to normal almost immediately, but he still let out an angry roar. The portal had been formed three metres off the ground, so as they were shot out of its centre they awkwardly fell down. To make things worse, this small island had one and a half times the gravity Norland did!

Even as the roar was still resounding through the island, the people behind Gaton all fell to the ground in a mess. Even though he himself managed to stabilise himself before he fell, he was knocked down by Kaylen who was covered in heavy armour. Finally losing his balance, he fell to the ground as Sharon watched on with glee.

Gaton pushed aside the heavy Kaylen who was pressed on top of him, hurriedly tidying his hair and taking big steps towards Sharon. He gritted his teeth, "This isn't funny, Your Excellency!"

Sharon continued laughing proudly, only pausing with great difficulty to say, "But I'm having a good laugh!"

Gaton turned around to find his subordinates still in a daze. Most of them had thick, heavy armour on, so it had been a recipe for disaster. They were still piled one atop the other, struggling to get

up, but these struggles only exacerbated the problem. Looking at the stone platform that was three metres high, he flew into a rage once more. He waved his hands as he roared, “Your Excellency, why would you build a teleportation gate that was three metres in the air?!”

The legendary mage’s face seemed to well with regret as she blinked, “About that... I’m not really good with magical calculations so I made an error with the foundation. Look, it’s only off by a bit...”

Hearing the words ‘magical calculations,’ a dark aura covered Gatón’s face. He immediately ended the conversation about the portal’s height, instead turning to admire the scenery of the island.

This island was Sharon’s semiplane. Every legendary mage had their own, but as proved by the Deepblue Sharon was quite special. Naturally, her semiplane wasn’t normal either. He had visited another legendary mage at their plane before, it had only been a deserted island that was roughly a few square kilometres in area. Based on area alone, Sharon’s island was twenty to thirty times larger.

And just like the area, other aspects of this place were far grander as well. Take the elemental pools for example. A normal legendary mage had three or four, but she had a magic lake and a pond for every major element. Even that could barely digest the mana from the lake, so she’d even built a few pools that created potions! Even if Sharon retired one day, she could just sit on the liquid of these pools and sell a diluted version to make a fortune! The time it took to just mix this liquid with some common laboratory liquids was almost negligible.

Besides, even if the elemental pools contained the same attributes as he had seen before, they seemed a little different this time. Gatón squinted his eyes to look at them, quickly discovering an anomaly, “Your Excellency, these pools are a metre wider than the last time I had the pleasure of standing here, and that was just a

year ago! Could you let me go to the bottom and look at how much the elements have crystallised?”

“Forget about it!” Sharon’s eyes glowed as she rejected him outright.

“The other legendary mages have elemental pools that are only slightly larger than bathtubs; it takes them ages to condense an elemental crystal. You have a full ten, and they’re full and proper ponds! The only thing I don’t understand is where the water from atop that mountain flows from, I’ve seen nothing!” Gaton offered high praise as he stroked his short beard, once more looking at the strange trees scattered all over the semiplane.

“It looks like you got a new batch of energy absorption trees. Tsk tsk, they really grow so fast in such an environment. Your Excellency, I’ve searched through a dozen planes, but why haven’t I so much as heard of these trees?”

Sharon let out a grunt, absolutely refusing to answer the question.

Gaton’s eyes glazed over with passion as he looked at the peripheral forest, “Your Excellency, let me dig out a few of these trees and take them home!”

At that moment, the lock of hair on Sharon’s forehead stood up, “You’re welcome to try!”

Gaton laughed a few times, dropping the topic. The unbelievable effect of these energy absorption trees was the source of this semiplane’s growth. Having visited another legendary mage’s semiplane, Gaton knew many other legendary mages would be willing to work under Sharon for fifty years in exchange for a single one of these remarkable trees. They had long lifespans anyway, but only Sharon had these trees.

This forest was the source of the plane’s growth. As long as these trees were around, Sharon would have unlimited access to magical

supplies. He knew well how valuable they were, so Gaton was only using them as a way to agitate Sharon.

He was still unsatisfied, his gaze lingering over every blade of grass, every piece of wood, and every inch of land in the semiplane as he inspected everything thoroughly. A close, unrestrained inspection of Sharon's semiplane did wonders for the growth of his own abilities. This place followed special laws of her own making, and even if her path to power could not be replicated it was a valuable experience for all who were still seeking the door to the legendary realm. Even if one had already crossed through, her experience would still be extremely valuable.

As his eyes fell on a steep cliff on the snowy mountain, he was suddenly startled. He recalled that the place had been much shorter the last time he was here; in fact, it had grown by tens of metres. It was protruding out, its top even broader than the mountain summit. One could already see the vague beginnings of a pillar being formed, with many caves at the top.

Gaton was a powerful figure who had travelled through many planes. He realised the protrusion was abrupt at a glance, and upon closer inspection the structure looked familiar even if it was a few times smaller. A shocking thought floated up in the back of his mind, and when he looked at it again his gaze was completely different.

“Your Excellency...” Gaton slowly spat out a breath, speaking as slowly as an old man who was about to bite the dust, “Are you planning to build a dragon kingdom here?”

Book 2, Chapter 109

Wealth(3)

Sharon's exquisite little face immediately filled up with a dazzling glow, as if she was a little girl talking about her favourite toy, "Why not? I looted those wretched things blind. They used to run away before they even saw me, letting me go and gather their treasures without having to fight, but now they're acting strange. An old fellow is leading the way, and now they don't escape. They don't even gather treasures! Every time I go visit them all I see is a completely barren nest, and a dragon giving me a helplessly weak gaze!"

At that point, the mage's expression grew vicious. "Can you imagine a dragon looking at you like it's a weakling? Did they really think I wouldn't slaughter them?" she said through gritted teeth.

"You didn't just kill them all?" Gaton enquired, baffled.

"No! Not even one!" Sharon ground her teeth, "I already robbed that old guy thirteen times, and he knows me very well. That's why it told the others that I wouldn't kill them as long as they didn't resist. At most, I'd just beat them up. I already have enough dragon materials on hand, and I basically can't use them all. There's no need for me to replenish my stock right now. That sly old bastard!"

"So you're creating a weyr..." Gaton went deep into thought. He rubbed hard at his short beard, completely unaware that he was using too much strength and pulling out quite a few hairs.

Sharon's voice rose an entire octave, "Yes! Since those lazy things aren't planning to go find treasure, they should at least work and fight for me! I don't think there are any dragons that should just eat and sleep all day! Once my weyr is done, I'll stuff them all inside and let those lazy bones know that there's a greater

legendary being in this world, and she's the boss!"

Gaton squinted until his eyes narrowed into slits, speaking slowly, "Do you mean you'll be able to summon the dragons in your weyr for battle?"

Sharon seemed completely oblivious to Gaton's probing, elated to show off her new toy, "Of course! Once the weyr is done, I'll be able to summon a fair number of them in one go. My enemies definitely won't expect real dragons in the middle of all the magic ones! Even as they're dying, they'll just wonder why my summons could fight for so long on the battlefield. Hehe, HAHAHA!"

The corner of Gaton's eyes twitched, and he stated calmly, "Your Excellency, this Summon Weyr spell... It should be your greatest secret..."

"That's fine! It isn't a problem for you to know, or for anyone else! I'll have so many dragons, and I'll be so powerful anyway. What's the point in hiding my strength?" Sharon's eyes were bright as morning stars.

Gaton could only laugh wryly in response. So what if her enemies weren't surprised by her techniques? Even if the dragons were expected, there would be so many of them. What was one to do in that situation?

This was another famous saying of the legendary mage. When one could look down on the enemy's strategy, they could also disregard their tactics.

"Um, Your Excellency..." Gaton was still unwilling to lose, trying to probe out any weaknesses, "This weyr of yours will be very powerful, but it would cost a lot to bui—" Before he could finish speaking, even Gaton himself realised he had nothing to contribute to that conversation. The immense cost was nothing to Sharon. With that forest of energy absorption trees, building a weyr was merely an issue of time, not cost.

“But maintaining the weyr would need so many resources. Dragons are huge eaters,” he immediately changed tracks.

“That’s true!” Sharon actually agreed, nodding vehemently. She then used her little hand to viciously smack Gaton in the back, nearly beating the sturdy man to the ground, “Don’t worry, you’ll be in charge of their food!”

“Me? WHY ME?!” Gaton yelled. This wasn’t the first time such a thing was happening.

He’d gone to great lengths on numerous expeditions, nurturing a batch of courageous elites and powerful, bloodthirsty generals. He’d gained control of numerous planes in a short span of time, and was nearly done with an expedition into a secondary plane as well. This was truly an immortal feat to anyone in Norland. However, regretfully he still wasn’t considered wealthy, having to worry about supplies for every war.

Much of his wealth flowed into the purse of this legendary mage next to him, and always in a manner that he could not understand. While this didn’t affect the benefits he gave to his followers to maintain their loyalty, his personal funds were nonexistent, not matching up to his current status.

Sharon often sponsored his expeditions. Strategic goods and materiel were cheap, and sometimes she even gave him priceless treasures for free. For instance, the heart of the lesser demon lord that she’d presented to Gaton for Richard’s ceremony wasn’t something that could be measured with money or power. Any of the three major empires would be willing to make her a duke in exchange for the heart. Used only to exchange for time, that sacrifice could grant one 300 to 500 years of life. All monarchs in the mortal world desired immortality the most.

Even so, the tremendous wealth he was acquiring flowed straight into Sharon’s hands. Gaton couldn’t tell whether he was making profit or loss over all their exchanges, only that his debts from that

one contract in the past were still ballooning with no signs of stopping. Forget the principal, even the interest he had to pay every year would leave him feeling suffocated.

And now, Sharon was leaving the costs for the dragons' meals to him. Although the Archeron leader was attempting to fight back, he knew that would all be in vain. When it came down to it, the legendary mage never fought a battle she wasn't confident in.

Sharon made some simple calculations, explaining to Gaton that he had a misunderstanding. In order to pay his interest for the year, he had to feed tens of dragons until they were full, and the quality of the food had to be high as well. Gaton's face had long since turned dark, but thankfully, none of his underlings could tell.

The few dozen people finally steadied their minds. Once they got used to the high gravity, the dizziness went away.

Most of them were fine, but Lina was not in a good state. The Dragon Mage was still sat on the ground, supporting her chest as she glared fiercely at her companions. The unlucky mage had been stuck at the bottom of them all, crushed under the large berserker Ward and the steel-like Kayde.

They all knew this was Sharon's semiplane, so they took a curious glance around them the moment they stood up. It was a rare opportunity to see such a place that was only mentioned in legends, especially since it belonged to Sharon. However, when they looked out all they could see was a tall barrier that was nearly dozens of metres tall, with a pitch-black void on top where a few streaks of colour occasionally streaked across.

Some tried to cross the screen, but they were viciously sent flying back. This was Sharon's home turf, and her power was boosted greatly here. The screen was extremely powerful, and even those who had already crossed into the realm of legendaries would be sent flying back. What could one expect from Gaton's underlings?

Book 2, Chapter 110

Persuasion

The legendary mage didn't want others to visit her semiplane. Be it the weyr, the magic lake, the elemental pools, or the energy absorbing trees, they were all things that would cause a sensation on the mainland. Gaton was just an exception, and Sharon wasn't worried about him because he was due on his debts. In the foreseeable future at least, it would be impossible for him to pay them off, meaning his future was tightly under her control.

Gaton would never have the thought of cheating her. He was an Archeron, and every one of them was extremely proud, cherishing their honour. He would rather fight in a field of blood and fire night and day to earn a scanty profit than owe a debt.

Of course, cheating a legendary mage, especially one like Sharon, was a dangerous thing to try. The half-built weyr alone was enough proof that even huge dragons paid a price for such actions. And they didn't even owe her anything!

Sharon cast a glance at the dozens of people who were stuck inside the barrier, frowning as she said unpleasantly, "Why are only eight of your rune knights here? Where are the rest? And those at the back, are they grade 2 rune knights? Are they just here to make up for the shortfall?"

Gaton shook his head, "The rest need to guard our island in Faust, the war there has yet to end. Cyrden's abilities aren't suitable for the environment in hell, so it's useless for them to go. I brought thirty grade 2 rune knights; these are elites that have followed me for a long time. They're not very strong individually, but they have unimaginable prowess as a team! Even hundreds of devils led by a few greater devils will have to retreat in defeat. Combined, this thirty man troop isn't much worse than the other eight!"

Sharon spreaded her hands, "Alright! I don't know how to fight in hell, I'm not as familiar with it as you are. I'll believe you this once. But I've never been to hell, are you sure we have to kill enough devils for the archdevil to listen to us?"

"Yes!" Gaton spoke with certainty, "We Archerons have traces of demon blood in us. The strongest of our ancestors have all experienced battles in hell, the devils are the creatures we hate the most. The family records on the places are rich and accurate; I can guarantee that killing enough of their number will cause the archdevil to listen to what we say. If you kill enough, he might even believe everything you say!"

Sharon held her own chin as she thought out loud, "That sounds interesting... But we should also take note of..."

Her expression suddenly grew very dangerous, as her speech slowed down, "It doesn't matter. This time I'll make sure to leave a deep impression on the archdevil, so he'll consider every suggestion I make in the future. Alright, I'll start the teleportation gate! I spent a lot of money to get the coordinates of one of the hells from an old guy. Sigh, even though it isn't easy to find one already ready to invade Norland, the feeling of being extorted still makes me unhappy! I hope the rewards this time are sufficient to make up for the loss!"

There was a lot of emphasis on the word 'rewards.'

A moment later, the busy enchanted puppets and elven servants had built a new teleportation gate within that magic barrier. Waves of damp, corrosive air wafted through the portal the moment it formed, and the faint roars of a beast sounded out from the other side.

Gaton lifted his two-handed sword with a groan, the blade lighting up with abyssal flames. He walked into the portal, the first of the lot to rush into hell. Behind him, his eight knights entered battle formation as they entered the portal as well. A neat box

formation of thirty rune knights followed after, each one comparable to level 18. They were a significant power no matter where they went, and unlike individuals they were an entire army!

The legendary mage was the last to move, lifting her robes as she hopped through the portal. With that, the portal went quiet as though nothing had happened.

The puppets and elven servants remained busy, continuing to carry out Sharon's previous orders. They rebuilt the screen of light that had surrounded the Archerons, preparing boxes, chests, and even a flying ship that were all spoils of a previous battle. Naturally, the cages Sharon wanted were prepared as well.

It only took a few minutes for the portal to open once more. This time, the regular rune knights came out first. Their armour and weapons were badly damaged, stained with blood everywhere. Some of their wounds were still emitting green smoke, corroded by devil blood. Of the thirty rune knights who'd gone in, only twenty one had come out. One could see what a disaster the battle was.

Soon after, Gaton's subordinates stepped out of the portal one after the other. They were all injured, but fortunately none were lost. However, Kaylen had to be dragged out by her twin. She was motionless, stuck between life and death with serious wounds all over. There were three deep cracks on her fort-like armour, constantly emitting smoke.

The moment Asiris stepped out of the portal, he immediately began treating her. He constantly flipped through a divine book covered in black leather, casting spells that healed, cleansed, and blessed her. The cleansing spell was used repeatedly, but Kaylen only let out the occasional soft groan as she still couldn't move her body at all. It was obvious that the injury was barely being controlled, and it wouldn't get better like this.

Gaton's roar sounded from behind the portal, after which an extremely strong aura passed through and permeated the

semiplane. A strong pressure was exerted on everyone present, and suddenly the volume of green smoke arising from everyone's wounds rose. Both of Asiris' hands trembled, his spells almost being stopped. He clenched his teeth and tore up a scroll, following which a stronger blessing landed on Kaylen's body. That was the only reason the situation didn't grow worse.

The energy absorbing trees in the semiplane suddenly swayed rapidly, breaking down the frightening aura in an instant and absorbing it. Following that, an even more furious roar resounded from the portal, the sheer volume causing the island to shake.

Gaton's roars were still sounding everywhere, but Sharon's voice soon interrupted him without being buried by the noise, "Why aren't you going back? What are you still waiting for? Go, don't block the way!"

Gaton suddenly flew out of the portal, a fair foot appearing behind him at the same time. It was apparent that Sharon had kicked him out, his body barrelling through the air as he fell straight to the ground. Unlike his normal majestic posture, he was now covered in blood all over his body. Half his hair had been singed by devil blood, now looking like a bunch of steel wire. The flames on his sword had long since been extinguished, the blade full of holes. It was unknown just how many devils he had killed, but the man stood there with great vigour.

For her part, Sharon showed no signs of following. Her foot pulled back from the portal as a crisp voice sounded out, "I'll deal with this guy!"

The portal shook violently. It was evident the collision of power between the two parties was so strong that its very stability was being threatened. The devil's roar was getting louder and angrier, but it was interrupted by the sound of a dragon. As more dragon roars joined the fray, the devil's own weakened rapidly as it disappeared into the distance.

Book 2, Chapter 111

Persuasion(2)

When Sharon finally appeared, only half of her body moved out of the portal. Both her hands were still stuck on the other side, seemingly lugging a heavy object. It took a burst of force for her to pull it through, revealing a severed pitch-black arm that was more than ten metres long and three metres thick. The arm fell to the blue crystal floor with a heavy thud the moment it came through, sinking deep into the ground. The exposed portion leaked thick, ink-black blood that created a corrosive mist the moment it landed. If it wasn't for the magical properties of the blue crystals making them resistant to corrosion, a deep hole would have been formed in the ground.

Sharon finally jumped out of the portal, landing on the arm. She waved her own, and as the blood seeping out of the devil's arm started floating up and converging into a spinning orb that steadily grew larger.

"Looking at the converging blood, the legendary mage sighed. She looked at Gaton, asking helplessly, "Do you want some of this?"

Gaton's face turned gloomy as he shook his head, "I have no use for it."

She immediately let out a sigh of relief, stowing the blood somewhere hidden as she spoke up, "Good, it isn't worth much anyway! Tch, that big fellow ran away and I only managed to get his arm, what a pity. It isn't enough to make up for the loss with the coordinates. It seems like you came back without much reward as well, little Gaton."

Gaton let out a long breath, "Being able to kill more than a thousand devils is reward enough. Besides, this will make you credible with the archdevil, and that will be a great way to teach

the Schumpeters an unforgettable lesson! If they don't react quick enough, they may even be destroyed!"

A layer of frost covered Sharon's tiny face the moment the Schumpeters were brought up, "Hmph, these guys have some nerve, messing with my little Richard! They think I can't deal with the big families of the Sacred Alliance directly, so they try these little tricks! I've been busy getting rich the past few years, spending little time in Norland. It seems like these fellows forgot the lesson I taught them all those years ago! I may be shy to act, but I can always force others to act on my behalf!

"Wait, no way! I lost my little Richard, there's no way I'm letting them off that easy! I can't just rely on the devils alone... There's some people I'm... umm... "familiar" with in the Abyss. Little Gaton, the portal is right there, take your troops back. I have to make a trip to the abyss, I need to visit one of the old fellows there!" The legendary mage grew angrier as she spoke, even brandishing her fist. She ignored the fatigue and injuries, immediately opening a portal and rushing through without pause.

Watching the fire and lava shooting out of the portal, Gaton had a bewildered expression on his face. Sharon's reaction to Richard being lost in the streams of time was much worse than even his; he was the boy's father!

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In the depths of one of the hells was an iron palace that was a few hundred metres tall. It was black in colour, coming from the spit of the many imps who were tasked with building it. The baptism of devil spit made the metal resistant to the corrosive atmosphere of hell, making it extremely valuable in other planes. Even a small piece of this metal could fetch a sky high price in other planes; something that could resist hell's corrosion was virtually indestructible almost everywhere else.

Thousands of devil soldiers were gathered at the plaza in front of

the palace. Their bodies were naturally strong, comparable to the armour mankind used in battle.

They were all armed with different weapons. The hells were rich in various ores, and the craftsmanship of these weapons was not inferior to those made by dwarves. Even though these soldiers' weapons were not enriched with magic, the innate quality of the metal made them quite effective, also giving them many other attributes. There were all kinds of arms here— pikes, axes, jagged swords, javelins, even bows. The army was nearly ten thousand strong, the various branches divided meticulously. Just looking at the precision of their military formations would let one know this troop was a formidable opponent.

Coordinating in a formation could greatly raise the power of even ordinary humans who had limited bodily strength, so what was one to say about the devils whose bodies were naturally much stronger?

At that very moment, a dark fog was churning in the overcast sky, and an extremely large devil fell from up above. The lower half of his body resembled that of a large dragon, his upper half shaped like that of a human. The devil had a solemn expression; ignoring the colour of his skin and the fine sharp horns on his head, he would be considered cold and handsome from a human perspective. However, his body was currently littered with scars, some even a few metres long and a metre deep. These wounds refused to heal, abyssal flames continuously burning on the wounds. One of his six arms had also been ripped out at the root, its whereabouts unknown.

The devil landed at the plaza, starting to make his way towards the palace. The entrance was tens of metres tall, but it seemed stuffy when he stood in front of it. He had to bow his head to walk through the doors.

Right past the entrance was the main hall of the palace. The place was large, more than a kilometre wide and a hundred metres tall.

A throne lay at the end, with a row of strange devils standing at each side. A devil who himself was no more than four metres tall was sat on the throne, holding his lower jaw and seeming deep in thought. Based on size alone the smallest of his subordinates was three to four times larger, but everyone remained silent without the guts to interrupt his train of thought.

This was the ruler of this layer of hell, Archdevil Abaddon.

The large devil who had lost an arm stood at the centre of the hall, kneeling down on his four legs as he spoke up solemnly, “Forgive me, my Lord, I am useless. We could not defeat the enemies, our troops suffered absolute defeat!”

The lower-ranking leaders in the palace were shocked. Cardis was a powerful general in Abaddon’s army, in charge of one of the army’s two most powerful legions. On top of that, his own battle capabilities put him in the top three of Abaddon’s subordinates. There had been less than fifty invaders, and yet he had returned in abject defeat. His legion had been wiped out, and he had lost an arm. If the humans had gone all out and chased him, he may not even have been able to escape.

Of course, if the invaders dared step foot into the palace they would be courting death. Everyone here thought the same way.

Book 2, Chapter 112

Persuasion(3)

The archdevil on the throne showed no emotion at all. He stared quietly at the general below with his obsidian eyes, speaking in a grating voice, “Those humans have already left. They weren’t here just to massacre one of my armies, did they leave a message?”

Cardis pulled out a letter, written on high quality magic paper that could resist the corrosive atmosphere of hell. The general pushed it forward with both hands, and a ball of black energy took over and brought the letter straight to the throne.

“These invaders were all strong, headed by a female mage. The only reason she would let me bring this letter to you is if she had some suggestions for our attack on Norland, my Lord,” Cardis explained.

The archdevil nodded in agreement, “She can kill of an entire legion, and cut off one of your arms. Her advice would certainly be worth heeding. What was her name?”

“Sharon, Your Highness.”

“Sharon...” The archdevil muttered this name several times under his breath. He had exceptional power unlike the other devils under him, able to obtain a lot of information about a target through their name along. He quickly opened the envelope, only to find two short lines.

At a single glance, the archdevil could tell that the first line specified the coordinates of a part of Norland. The information was so precise that he would be able to spawn his portal within ten metres of the specified location. As for the second line, it was some text sealed with magic, the meaning within being transferred directly to his mind. However, it somewhat puzzled him.

“Out the door and turn right.”

The archdevil pondered over this for an entire day, leaving everyone else waiting for the same amount of time. He eventually probed, “What else did this Sharon say, Cardis? Tell me everything.”

Cardis tried his best to recall. Greater devils were comparable to human grand mages in intelligence, so it was impossible for them to just forget things. He thought over the entire battle in an instant, “Right, she said something strange. ‘Sharon will be on the left.’”

The archdevil nodded silently, sending Cardis off to rest. A black flame sprung forth from his hand, burning the letter completely before he pointed to two of the leaders, “The two of you will lead this invasion into Norland. Take the first legion, and ensure to cause enough damage and reap as many souls as possible. The ultimate fall of Norland will depend on accumulated impact.”

The two lesser lords were surprised and excited, falling to their knees as they accepted the command.

With a wave of his hand, the devil on the throne summoned two balls of black energy that floated up to them, forming sparkling black gems that were embedded into their chests. At a critical moment, these gems would be able to bring the two back to this palace in an instant. Every lesser lord was a valuable asset, unlike the normal soldiers who were just cannon fodder. Every time their armies grew larger than ideal, devils made use of war to cull the numbers.

After some further contemplation, the archdevil commanded, “Once you exit the portal, all troops are to march right and attack. No matter what is to the front or left, ignore it all!”

Although the lords found the order very strange, they still indicated that they would comply. Devil hierarchy was quite strict, and one could never go against their ruler’s commands.

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Moments later, the roar of a demon lord shook every corner of one of the levels of the abyss. All sorts of demons were left sprawled over the ground, not daring to move in fear of incurring their lord's wrath.

A powerful demon was floating in mid-air above a lake of lava, with indescribable power. His powerful aura formed countless mysterious demonic characters that fluttered around him in the air. Across him was a magnificent ball of blue light, with a small lady floating within.

“SHARON! How dare you appear in front of me? Do you think there is no way for my fury to reach Norland?”

The legendary mage stuck out her tongue, chuckling, “Bermond Gauguin, I only came because I know you are already prepared to invade Norland. Come on, don't be angry, you know it won't help at all. You're not chasing me away! Imagine how crushed your dignity would be if another fight like that broke out. The lords of the other levels would be talking about it for millennia!”

The demon lord snorted, licks of fire spurting out of his nostrils. “What are you here for?” he demanded in a cold voice, “To stop me, or to provoke me further?”

“Neither. There is little benefit for me to provoke you. I'm here to offer a deal,” the legendary mage said as she straightened her hair, “I can give you a set of coordinates to Norland. In exchange, your troops will have to abide by a simple rule when they go through. Also, I want the right to hunt in your lands.”

Bermond grew more suspicious, asking, “What rule?”

“Very simple. Out the door and turn left.”

The demon lord snorted once more. He didn't agree yet, asking, “What's on the right of the portal?”

“I am.”

“What about the front?”

“A legion of devils. They will turn right themselves before launching their attack. I doubt you’d want to fight them in a bloody battle in Norland, no?”

The demon lord nodded, “So the ones on the left are your enemies?”

Sharon broke out into a wide grin, showering him with high praise, “As expected of a demon lord, so clever!”

Bermond moved his body, the lake of lava below him starting to bubble and boil. “Alright!” he declared in a thunderous voice, “I agree. I shall forgive you for killing one of my subordinates in that earlier hunt, and you can hunt in my lands again. However, you can only take regular demons!”

“I’m off then! Here are the coordinates.” The legendary mage ejected a blue bead of light from her fingertips, shooting it towards Bermond Gauguin before flying out through the back. In just a few moments, she was dozens of kilometers away. She suddenly plunged down, fishing up a large demon before she escaped through a portal to the tune of Bermond’s furious bellows.

“It’s just a small repayment for the coordinates, don’t be so petty!” Sharon had already disappeared, but her crisp and melodious voice still echoed throughout the abyss.

Sighing heavily, Bermond Gauguin stopped short in his chase. In any case, even if it wouldn’t be hard to get coordinates in Norland he would have had to sacrifice dozens of such demons. And since the standards of measurement differed because of the laws of the planes, there were bound to be problems when they started building a teleportation gate. In the worst case, several of his troops might have died. He had actually gotten the better deal, with the legendary mage just taking one. It was just that demons were normally not that calculative.

As for the deal, Bermond Gauguin was determined to keep his word. Only lesser lords could pass through such portals, and this

was Norland's mainland they were heading to. If they turned right and ran into Sharon, they would most likely end up without a way to return. He didn't want to return from a trip to a primary plane with nothing but a bloody fight with devils to his credit. Demons may love chaos by nature, but they weren't completely senseless.

The only choice left now was to turn left.

'The fellow on the left better pray hard,' the demon lord thought to himself.

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At that time in Norland, Gaton was walking out of a portal with his battered troops, returning to his family's territory. Although he had lost a third of his rune knights, he managed to slaughter an entire legion of the devils. In the end, his gains outweighed the losses. Additionally, having experienced the cruel bloodbath in hell for four days and three nights, the survivors were all stronger than ever.

Breathing the fresh air of Norland once more, Gaton's frown slowly disappeared from his face. Stabbing his longsword into the ground, he gazed into the distance. In that direction, behind a long mountain range, was a rich and fertile plain. This was the ancestral land of the Schumpeters, the most important of all their lands.

Book 2, Chapter 113

Escorted Into Battle

War and plunder was a perpetual cycle between the myriad planes.

Norland wasn't the only primary plane, with many known planes that were no inferior to it like hell, the abyss, the celestial plane, and the astral plane. Some secondary planes possessed unusual single powers that made them no inferior to primary planes, like the elemental and shadow planes. The relationship of all these planes with Norland was complicated; they weren't so distant that they existed only in legend and folklore like normal men thought, but they weren't friendly like some theologians claimed. The only constant was conflict and war.

Just as Norland's nobility was intent on expanding their influence outward, many other planes wished to conquer them. Every now and then, some powerful beings would construct a portal that connected to Norland, leading troops out in an attempt to conquer this beautiful and fertile plane.

Given the power system and sheer area of the plane, it was impossible to conquer Norland with power alone. After all, the number of troops one could transfer through any passage between planes was rather limited. However, with enough numbers came a swathe of fools. There were always some hot-headed powerhouses from another plane attempting to launch attacks on Norland, although they couldn't even conquer an earl's lands with the meagre armies they managed to send.

Such invasions took place practically on a daily basis. Norland's gods didn't issue oracles for this at all, or any other form of warning either. After all, the number of invasions was just too large. Even if they weren't fed up with it, they had limited followers and resources.

As for the invaders, their fate was very simple. Since Norland itself was constantly embroiled in war, it made no difference whether the opponent was an enemy from this plane or from another. Invaders were actually far easier to deal with; issues of politics, power balance, and family feuds were of no concern.

With the Eternal Dragon holding a firm position, Norland's pantheon did not reign supreme like those on lesser planes did. Numerous legendary beings were always plotting to build up their own power, advancing to become demigods after which they would transcend. Who would want to worship these deities that weren't too far beyond them?

As a general rule, the more powerful a plane the lesser the status of the gods presiding over it. Those who transcended everything had no need for faith, like the Eternal Dragon or the rumoured Overgod.

No matter what, the powerhouses of any primary plane had an extremely good understanding of the frequent visits from the abyss and hell. The founding emperor of the Sacred Alliance had even organised a military expedition so large it was unprecedented in history. The two planes themselves had launched countless attacks on Norland in the past, so Norland's understanding of them was quite thorough.

Needless to say, all of these invasions had met a bitter end. Only formidable powers like greater devils and lesser demon lords managed to escape to their homes, with none of the average soldiers surviving the battle. However, these invasions didn't mean the rulers of hell and the abyss were foolish. They simply used these invasions to cut down the number of their lowest classes, at the same time drilling their troops. Only those who could survive the harsh environment of a planar war were valuable, qualified to join the endless war in the depths of the abyss and hell as the two planes vied for greater power.

The Schumpeters had considerable reputation on Norland, at

least in the human empires. Being one of the fourteen families of Faust wasn't just a symbol, it actually held great advantages. The family got the chance to enter the Church of the Eternal Dragon much more often, the blessings they received exceeding expectations. A powerhouse having their life extended, coordinates of a new plane, formidable divine tools... these were all important to the ascent of a family.

The Schumpeters had possessed high status for a long time, allowing them to accumulate an abundance of wealth and knowledge. Not only did they know how to breed the bearguard knights and their magical mounts, they also had a profound understanding of demons and devils. This extended beyond just their power system, including relevant information on more than a hundred lords. They knew of the endless war, and the brutal relationship between the demons and devils. To them, this was all common knowledge.

Marquess Riain, the highest authority of the Fjord of Longing, was naturally someone equipped with that common knowledge.

Riain had become a saint thirty years ago. Although his individual ability was beginning to decline, his experience would not fade with age. If anyone wished to belittle this towering old man for his greying hair, they would surely pay a heavy price.

At that moment, Riain was dressed in a magnificent suit of silver armour, exquisitely designed with a faint glimmer of magic radiating from it. Clearly, it wasn't just some flashy equipment without any substance. The marquess also had an equally exquisite longsword in hand; it was magical equipment as well. Behind him were ten rune knights and thirty of the bearguard. With Sinclair having taken away half of the bearguard knights, the fact that such a powerful force had been assembled this quickly showed how important the fjord was to the Schumpeters.

Behind this troop were about two hundred heavily armed knights, as well as ten mages and thousands of elite infantry. Riain

was well aware that the power of this army wasn't enough to wipe out the incoming devils, but he was still confident of withstanding their attack and turning it into a battle of attrition. He would make use of the extensive lands and complex terrain in the territory, fighting for time. As long as he held them off for a day, the powerhouses of the family would be able to rush over. These powerhouses were an army's soul.

The marquess' confidence came from the more than twenty clerics amongst his troops. Not only could they sustain the rune knights and bearguard knights on a large scale, but they could also inflict serious harm on the devils that came from hell.

Another part of his confidence came from the existence of the Archerons nearby. Marquess Gaton's territory was adjacent to the fjord, and intel said the marquess himself and half of his knights were currently in the territory. That force alone would be able to defeat the invading troops. Even if the devils were led by lesser lords, they could only exhibit less than legendary power in Norland. In the same vein, humans would lose some of their strength if they battled in hell.

Although the relationship between the two families was strained, there would be no difference in the attack of the foreign invaders. They wouldn't bother to differentiate between the Schumpeters' rivers and the Archeron jungles.

The Schumpeter troops were arranged in orderly formation, with Riain standing alone at the head. He squinted his eyes, already noticing the spacetime warping in the region. He knew that the passage from hell would open up soon, involuntarily tightening the grip around his sword as he felt like he could smell the rancid odour of the devils.

Across the vast field, the Archeron troops could be seen entering the battlefield from kilometres away as they gradually spread out. There weren't many of them, less than 500 in total, but Riain could feel several extraordinary auras amongst their ranks. The towering

figure atop a tall, black warhorse in particular heightened his nervousness and worry even further.

Gaton was here in person!

Book 2, Chapter 114

Escorted Into Battle(2)

Decades of experience allowed Marquess Riain to pick up an unusual scent. Gaton wasn't supposed to appear on this battlefield. Even if he was in his territory at the moment, he would be busy planning planar invasions. As the premier powerhouse of the Archerons and an exceptional commander, his use was on the planar battlefields, not here. Something as simple as an invasion from hell could be taken care of by three or four of his thirteen knights.

It wasn't just Gaton; the most terrifying of his thirteen knights, Mordred, was present behind him as well. And behind that fiend were seven more of the thirteen knights!

And in a line behind them were fifty other rune knights. The rest of the troops were made of elite soldiers, with none that weren't adept at sudden attacks. Given the Archerons' military prowess, there was no need for heavy troops. A sudden assault by Gaton would breach even the strongest of armies.

In front of the Archerons, Marquess Riain felt like his own army was as fragile as a crystal. An absurd thought suddenly entered his mind: could it be that Gaton was going to help the invaders from hell take his army out?

However, something entirely unfathomable followed. Just as the portal from hell was starting to form, spacetime started to distort in an empty space a few kilometres away. Another portal was taking shape as well!

At the same point in time, with almost overlapping coordinates, two invasions were actually occurring at the same time? And this was happening at the border of the family's most important territory? A rough estimate with the size and intensity of this new portal indicated that the invasion was about the same size as the

one from hell. Riain could hardly believe his eyes, a chill penetrating his bones as he felt the weight of his sword increase tenfold. He felt like he would lose his grip any moment.

The marquess suddenly felt the immeasurable warmth of the Archeron troops, and was grateful for the fact that they neighboured the Archeron lands. His only concern right now was whether the Archerons possessed the legendary military might they were known for, and whether it would be enough to defeat the invaders.

The two portals stabilised at the same time, and large numbers of devils and demons poured forth. The frontlines were less than two kilometres apart; they were about to clash in a melee.

Riain suddenly felt very lucky. It was unexpected for devils and demons to appear at the same time. This was no simple matter, as one these two groups met they would erupt into a vicious battle. Perhaps this invasion could be resolved without much effort.

He lifted his sword up, ordering, "Everyone stay where you are! Remain on the defensive, none of you is to initiate an attack without permission. Mages, you are not to cast spells!"

Everyone understood the reasoning behind Riain's orders. With a chance that the devils and demons would take each other down, it would be extremely silly to do anything to provoke them.

The two invasions had clearly spotted each other. The devil troops immediately got into battle formation, while the demons started roaring in a display of might. They did spot the humans around, but at that moment their innate hostilities erupted to blind them to everything else. A battle was about to ensue.

The last to step out of the portals were two greater devils and a lesser demon lord. Then, the strangest thing happened in front of everyone's eyes.

Seeing the demons, the two greater devils started emitting a

strong aura. However, they merely stared menacingly at the demons before waving the weapons in their hands, giving out multiple orders. The organised devils then turned to the right, marching forward.

The greater devils had been ordered to turn right the moment they left the portal. They weren't daring enough to ignore their lord's orders, so even though there were demons right up ahead, they resolutely followed their orders.

The demon lord, for his part, was startled. However, seeing the devils' actions calmed him down, Bermond's order ringing clearly in his mind.

This was an order that could not be disobeyed. Even though his innate nature egged him on to rush forward and kill, there were two greater devils in front of him. Starting a fight with them would not result in anything good. He unwillingly looked towards the right, and the unmoving Archeron men made him feel nervous. Eventually, he realised there was no other choice but to abide by Bermond's orders; that would be the only way to keep his life once he returned.

Sharon was also apparently towards the right; that fact alone was sufficient to leave him trembling with fear. Even though he didn't see her, this demon lord firmly believed that the lady who instilled so much fear in his kind was definitely hiding somewhere.

He eventually let out a thunderous roar that echoed throughout the battlefield. The demons hesitantly changed direction one by one, but a few of the fiercer ones couldn't hold back their urge to advance towards the devils. This agitated the demon lord, and he leapt on top of a few of them. Two of them were crushed under his feet, while another was torn to shreds. He then grabbed three more and threw them towards the left, in the direction of Marquess Riain.

Out the portal and to the left, never look back. This was the order

Bermond had given him on his life.

The ground started to shake as black mist and raging flames mixed to form dark clouds that pressured over the Schumpeter territory. The demons' roars were akin to a sudden clap of thunders, while the devils' solemn silence was suffocating.

With a clang, the magic sword fell from Riain's hand. The marquess was completely unaware of that, his mind completely blanked out. He had completely forgotten to pass down any orders, stunned by the inconceivable sight in front of him.

Nobody could have imagined that the demons and devils would charge at them, side by side.

If one looked from above, the two armies would look like two rushing streams of the same colour. This pair of adversaries who'd been evenly matched in the endless war took the chance to showcase their military strength.

The demons didn't have formations or strategy. They just rushed forth towards every obstacle they saw, until every living being in the region was torn to shreds. Conversely, the devils were a neatly organised army. The two greater devils were capable and qualified commanders, fiercely leading their troops' assault.

In the coming days, the armies from the abyss and hell would forge ahead side by side, none faster than the other. They occasionally dispersed and gathered back together, although they never came within a kilometre of each other. No conflicts of any kind occurred between them, creating the false impression that the endless war was but a myth.

This strange event caused a huge blow to the Schumpeters. They quickly organised four lines of defense, but each was made short work of. When more than a thousand soldiers had been slain, they had no choice but to give up on reinforcing the Fjord of Longing. They reluctantly gave up a significant plot of fertile land and a few valuable ore mines, gathering over 3000 soldiers at the core of

their lands. They spent all the magic crystals they had in stock, building two portals that pulled their elites back from planar wars. This was the only way they managed to put up a fight.

All this time, the Archeron troops followed the invaders while maintaining a comfortable distance between them. They didn't stray too far away, but they didn't take part in the battle either. The demons and devils turned a blind eye to this, remaining fixated on a ferocious charge towards the Schumpeter troops.

Book 2, Chapter 115

Escorted Into Battle(3)

The final battle occurred at a seaside harbour near the Fjord of Longing. With nowhere to run, the Schumpeters gathered all their remaining troops and began a desperate, bloody battle with the demons and devils. With the three powerhouses on the invading side competing with their own, the battle ended with no winner. The demons and devils had only a hundred or so warriors left, of which a dozen had successfully levelled up. More than half of the Schumpeters' army was wiped out, with the rest retreating into the harbour and preparing to defend the city to their deaths.

The Schumpeter Family still had a few garrisons in other territories awaiting orders, and the core of the family in Faust had been locked in heated debate for a while whether they should reinforce, yet to come to a decision. However, the war came to a screeching halt as the three lords who had completed their tasks took those who had advanced and returned to their own planes. Those that were abandoned would continue fleeing within Norland, soon to be completely exterminated.

Gaton watched as the two parties disappeared into portals from a few kilometres away, only then waving his arm to have his subordinates turn around and return to the family's lands.

At the harbour, Marquess Riain was watching the scene from atop the tallest watch tower, laughing miserably as he huffed out a long breath. Those at his side all heaved a sigh of relief when they saw Gaton leave; their fear of the Archerons exceeded their fear of the devils and demons.

Although he hadn't yet made a move, Gaton decided to go back anyway. The Schumpeters here had been thoroughly destroyed, and he could follow up with legal ways more conveniently as he eroded their power. Were he to attack them now, he would be

condemned by almost all of human nobility. Watching on without lifting a finger to help was one matter, but taking advantage of this situation would cross a bottom line. It would give an excuse for the Schumpeter Family's allies to intervene.

Even the Schumpeters knew that, but who could be sure when it came to the Archerons? The entire family was known for their lunacy, and every move of theirs was unpredictable.

At that moment, a young man from a branch family asked with puzzlement, "What did those damned Archerons want if they weren't going to fight us or the invaders? Were they just here to have a look at the fjord?"

Nobody could answer his doubts, but these words were like thunder as they rang in Riain's ears! "DAMN IT!" the old man cried out involuntarily, "Dragon Mage Lina was in that team! The Archerons know the coordinates of our family planes!"

The moment he finished speaking, the marquess spat out a mouthful of blood and turned pale, falling backwards. His servants hurried to grab ahold of him, but still gasping he didn't waste any time as he grabbed one of them, yelling, "Quick, prepare a griffin! I need to go to Faust right away, hurry!"

An hour later, the griffin had finally been prepared. The feeble marquess disregarded the advice of the people around him, stubbornly mounting the creature. However, at that very moment clear and melodious griffin-calls rang out in the sky as more than a dozen flew past. They had come from the direction of the Archeron lands, their destination obviously being Faust.

The marquess swayed as he felt the world going dark before his eyes, blood seeping out of the corner of his lips once more. A moment later, three griffins of their own took off from the harbour and headed for Faust as well.

In this peculiar invasion that had lasted longer than a week, more than half of the Fjord of Longing had been destroyed. The fields

the devils and demons had walked through were polluted by the aura of hell and the abyss, and wouldn't have normal yields for years. It would take several months for the collapsed mines to start production as well.

Over the continuous battles, nearly four thousand soldiers had met their end, alongside fifteen of their rune knights. Not even twenty bearguard knights were left as well, marking the Schumpeters' fall from an exalted noble family to a second class one. It was obvious they would be forced out of their island in Faust.

However, the worst loss was the coordinates of their planes being leaked when they'd built those portals. Henceforth, the Archerons could assault their planes at any point in time. The Schumpeters would have no choice but to station massive forces on their planes, but even then their current weakness meant that going against the rabid Archerons would be an impossible task. The only thing Riain could hope for was stopping the Archerons on the battlefield of politics.

However, would that even work? Politics without the military power to back it up was like cheese baked until it went soft. People would be able to cut them apart however they liked.

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At that moment, in a remote plane by the name of Faelor, Richard had no idea of the incidents back home. He was deep asleep, covered snugly with a blanket.

They had crossed into the desert, the sandy earth now uneven. The blazing sun turned the place into a world of fire during day, and at night it grew so chilly the cold would seep into one's bones. There was practically no signs of life across the land except for a few cacti growing stubbornly in the shade of some sand dunes.

That night, they were camped under a rocky peak that had caved in, shielding them from the biting cold winds. However, there

were no tents set up. Hundreds of people slept in their normal clothes on, or covered themselves with blankets.

The past few days were full of fighting and fleeing. At least four or five slaving groups totalling hundreds of people had been waiting nearby, hoping for the chance to deal him a fatal blow. These hunters were mainly from Red Cossack, although there were some smaller merchant groups, horse bandits, and mercenaries as well.

They were like wolves in a field, coming and going like the wind. Battles could start at any point, so they had no time to set up camp at all. The past few nights they were all resting in their clothes and armour, ready to get up and battle at a moment's notice.

Nights were chilly and very quiet. Far in the distance one could hear the sounds of the two trolls snoring, but strangely enough it gave one a sense of security. The cold left Richard snuggling further into his blanket, only to feel waves of comfortable warmth. That was Flowsand, pressed closely into him. Only in her dreams would she reveal her more fragile side, reminding people that this was a young girl who wasn't yet eighteen.

Cold, clear moonlight shone on this small, temporary camp. Richard and Flowsand were naturally at the centre of the circle, ringed by Gangdor and the knights from Norland. Next were the barbarians, orcs, and the kind, with the trolls squeezed in between. The trolls snored quite loudly, and only the barbarians and the orcs who had the same tendencies could tolerate it. At the outermost circle were hundreds of desert warriors. Their long robes functioned as natural blankets, and no matter how rough the ground was they could fall asleep once they laid down.

At the peak of the rock formation, Olar was sitting around bored. His ability to see in low light helped him scan over the surroundings, his bow in hand. As long as there was any sign of malicious intent, an arrow would fly out immediately. This was a great location, allowing him to monitor everything in his line of

sight.

The elf wasn't the only one on vigil, though. He was accompanied by Waterflower, but he couldn't see where she was and only assumed that she was hidden off somewhere in the curtain of the night.

A few wind wolves randomly wandered around the outermost edges. They made for excellent sentinels. Even if the most terrifying of assassins appeared and killed them in an instant, the deaths alone would send alarm bells ringing in Richard's consciousness.

The past few days had been an entirely new experience. Every day they battled and fled without rest, sleeping as much as they could at night to recover their stamina. Food and water became extremely valuable, and they had no place to shower. Being filthy had grown normal, leaving nobody caring about their appearance. All unnecessary materials were abandoned, leaving behind only the most precious magic materials and scrolls.

Even as a mage who was commanding the army, Richard was getting injured a lot more recently, proof of how intense the battles got. He had learnt how to receive injuries properly on an elementary level, turning life-threatening attacks into mere light cuts.

At the end of every battle, he was completely worn out. Not only did he have to direct the battle, he also needed to judge when best he could use his spells. He had to keep note of dozens of targets even in the smaller fights, so even with his digital vision and blessing of wisdom he was being taxed greatly. All he wanted whenever the enemies retreated was to collapse and sleep.

This was when the importance of the vitality rune began to show itself. With the continuous cycle of fleeing, battling, and fleeing again, in a situation where he didn't have mana potions to use, the ability to quickly restore his strength became an important factor.

At this point, Richard had to admit that there were some amazing people amongst Red Cossack. The armies were like a pack of wolves, circling their prey and taking a bite at every opportunity. The moment he showed an opening they leapt forward and tore off flesh, leaving a dripping wound behind with every attack. Whether the attack succeeded or not, these attackers immediately retreated. They never kept up the fight.

Book 2, Chapter 116

A Murderous Dream

The pack was growing by the day. New bandits joined every once in a while, and it soon had more than 4000 men. A lot of the new enemies were horse bandits that were unafraid of death, easily mobilised to serve other functions. And while there weren't as many slavers, they all were far more powerful individually. Everyone who managed to survive in the Bloodstained Lands had their own set of skills.

A strong killing intent permeated the serene night. However, everyone was still sleeping very soundly. After countless battles of life and death, they had come to trust their comrades. A good rest was key to survival, so they let their worries go and caught up on much needed rest.

The chilly weather left Richard snuggling into his blanket more and more. He furrowed his brows, looking to be in the midst of a tumultuous dream.

And dreaming he was. For a mage that had a considerable foundation in meditation, this was a very rare event. Inside the dream he saw himself riding a warhorse, gazing into the vast mountains and rivers ahead of him.

He was in the Schumpeter Family's lands, with that of the Josephs across the river bank. One could see a chaotic scene in the distance, with men and troops running all over. They were fleeing from a city, forming streams of humans that were trying to escape.

One could see groups of knights emerging from the villages and towns nearby, merging into a steady stream of soldiers that assembled in front of him. This stream seemed to be endless, new knights appearing every once in a while to join the enemy formation. Their origin was unknown.

He could sense that more knights would gather as he waited. He thus raised his arm, ordering the attack. Two battalions suddenly split off from the army behind him, hurrying to flank around the opponent. They formed a large arc that converged on the enemies, cutting off their path of retreat.

He was giving out command after command. Two more troops charged towards the opponents' flanks, following which the infantry behind him inched forward and crushed the enemy in. The archers had already nocked their arrows, letting go at his command to launch a rain of arrows that hit the enemy formations with complete accuracy.

However, the archers were actually kilometres away from the enemy. How even did the shower of arrows reach his opponent? Even Olar did not possess such skill, the ability reserved for elven great archers over rank 15.

Richard looked inquisitively behind him, seeing rows of elven archers of huge status on the plains behind him. These elves were an entire third larger than normal. It was said that elves grew in size when they became archers, their strength and endurance increasing greatly. This was quite similar to demons; one only needed to look at a demon's physique and stature to judge their power.

However, Richard didn't understand what was going on. Since when had he acquired so many elven archers?

Despite his inhibitions, his subconscious mind linked to them just like he was to the broodmother. Richard continued to set their targets, thousands of arrows penetrating into a small portion of the enemy's left flank. Another volley rained forth, travelling over a thousand metres and blanketing an area. Every enemy there was instantly wiped out; hundreds of knights collapsed to the ground, creating a hole in the enemy formation.

A split second later, he saw thousands more arrows pierce

through the skies. He took a glimpse behind him, realising that each archer had three arrows nocked instead of one. He had no time to marvel at the technique, however; his subconscious mind had already contacted the soldiers on the left flank, adjusting their directions to have them spear into the hole in the enemy formation.

However, the moment he issued the command he realised the warhorses of the enemy knights had warped into enormous earth dragons. He looked at the infantry that was inching towards the opponents, realising they were growing inch by inch with every step they took. By the time they were close enough to engage in the melee, they had become huge, malevolent demons. Roars echoed in the sky as giant dragons flew out, hovering in mid-air as they awaited his commands.

Across the field, the escaping commoners transformed into giant knights that charged towards his troops in an attempt to outflank them. He was stunned, immediately ordering a change in formation as he reinforced the offensive. However, it was too late. Both parties had already charged into each other, creating a strange scene. When the opposing troops were attacked, the knights transformed back into commoners that collapsed in a bloodbath.

Richard felt nothing for this, his conscious mind in a whirl as he sent out new commands every few milliseconds. However, both armies now had more than a hundred battalions in the fight, and he began losing sight of the whole picture. His head was throbbing so much he felt like it would explode at any minute, but Richard could only grit his teeth and continue.

Just as the battle entered an impasse, the sky began to darken as colour seeped out of the entire world. Eventually the dream was in black and white, the soldiers halting their movements as everything blurred into everything else. Countless shadows formed numerous nightmare creatures, so many that they were

impossible to count. All these creatures started hurling themselves towards Richard, leaving his vision full of talons and tusks.

Whoosh! The sound of wind parting was audible as Richard flipped through the air, sitting up. It was only then that he realised everything was just a dream. However, the dream had thoroughly exhausted him, as if he really had commanded an entire army in an endless battle.

A gush of cold wind flew past the area, the piercing cold causing him to shiver. This made him realise he had broken out in cold sweat during the course of his dream. His clothes were completely soaked, and the endless gusts of wind grew extremely unbearable.

It took him a few deep breaths to regain his composure, but just at that moment he suddenly felt faint tremors in the ground. He sprawled down immediately, putting his ears to the ground. His senses were heightened at that moment, and he realised that the ground was shaking harder and harder by the second.

He instantly leapt up like a flying fish, shouting at the top of his lungs, “INCOMING! EVERYONE, GET UP!”

Olar also got up from the formation at the same time, starting to scream, “Enemies coming from the northeast! There’s about five hundred of them, with at least ten powerful members! They’re a kilometre away!”

The enemies could cover the kilometre of distance within a few minutes at their fastest charge. The soldiers who were lying on the ground instantly got up, grabbing their weapons which were within arm’s reach.

As the campsite was embroiled in chaos, the elven bard sent out three arrows that were augmented by magic. They flew out more than five hundred metres, sending three of the knights at the lead off their horses. However, with the hundreds of soldiers charging towards this place, these were like small ripples in a raging river. They wouldn’t matter in the grand scheme of things.

The surviving wind wolves charged off the rocks, plunging into the frontlines of the enemy to engage in close combat. Six or seven more knights fell off their horses with blood-curdling shrieks, crushed by the oncoming stampede.

Book 2, Chapter 117

An Ambush In The Dark

Once they unleashed their wind blades, the wind wolves fell back to the rock formation and returned to position. They looked towards the sky, letting out desolate howls.

Ten or so of the wind wolves were marked with special colours that glowed in the dark. This allowed the chaotic camp to quickly enter formation, as the half-orcs, barbarians, and desert people found their respective wolves and conglomerated around them. The entire army assembled quickly into battalions, each led by a knight. The knights would command the troops, while the wind wolves showed them their targets.

Even as the troops were finding their positions, Gangdor and the two trolls started roaring in anticipation of the incoming cavalry. Their immense strength allowed them to be fearless in the face of the opposing horse bandits who were below level 10.

The axe in Gangdor's hands glowed with magical light; it was taken after Schitich had been killed. As long as one could keep the axe above ground level, they could easily split apart the oncoming riders. This new weapon exponentially increased the brute's capabilities, making him a meat grinder on the battlefield.

At the same time, the hammers Medium Rare and Tiramisu wielded also boasted of immense might. Tiramisu remembered to play his part as a mage, casting Bull's Strength and Stone Skin on himself and his brother before hand. It was a simple yet effective strategy, increasing their attack and defence to make them huge threats on the battlefield.

The three of them were like an ocean reef, standing strong despite the surging tide of enemies. Anyone who encountered them was instantly destroyed, their formations crumbling apart. However, most of the oncoming army bypassed them, heading

straight for the heart of the battlefield.

In the meanwhile, a magic ball of grey light exploded out on the battlefield, Zendrall's Strengthen Fear spell. It sent more than ten of the oncoming riders into chaos, slowing the incoming wave,

At that point, Waterflower stealthily sneaked out from behind a canyon. She let out a piercing shriek, killing intent radiating fear in all directions. However, the effects were limited. Only ten or so warhorses that were close to her were startled, causing the riders to stop and hinder their comrades' charge. However, the rest of the horse bandits were largely unaffected. Closer inspection would reveal that the bandits and horses all had their ears stuffed with cloth. Evidently, they were prepared for this line of attack. It was something they had learnt from experience, where they had lost many lives to the young lady's shriek.

Thankfully, Waterflower's move was not without gain. She had made use of the momentary stall to take out two soldiers who'd fallen close to her, before retreating into the darkness once more.

A large majority of the riders didn't have the time to care about the girl, continuing to charge towards the camp. The horses at the front even leapt up, charging into the midst of battle.

Two novice knights skillfully laid their swords in the path of a leaping horse, causing it to let out a huge cry before losing balance. However, it landed in an area that had the most concentration of humans, and a few desert people who couldn't escape in time bore the brunt of the damage. Many perished.

More and more riders rushed towards the camp, only to be met with three fireballs shot out by Richard. The fireballs lined up in a row, exploding abruptly to cover an area that was ten metres wide and thirty metres long. This wasn't the end of the damage, however. Even if the horses' ears had been stuffed, they were not blindfolded. The flames started the creatures that were nearby, creating chaos on the periphery of the flames.

The void created by the spells was immediately occupied by Richard's troops. Two wind wolves led thirty-odd barbarians and half-orcs into forming a living wall, using their strong bodies to block the knights who couldn't stop their momentum in time. Even though that sent many of them flying back with bloody mouths, it managed to put an end to the charge.

Two other wind wolves led the desert warriors who'd mounted their own horses to flank on the left and right of the gap, immediately splitting a third of the attacking troops off from the main body. At the back of the camp, the remaining wind wolves were converging with their troops. It would be a mere few minutes before they assembled into a tight, impenetrable formation.

The horse bandits were dauntless and experienced. However, faced with a disciplined army that had the necessary preparation, they would only end up massacred. Zendrall repeatedly chanted a few spells, sending warriors of darkness out one after the other. He called three of them out at a time, casting a spell on them to boost their powers. He then sent them forward to charge into the enemy.

That had been Richard's idea as well, and it had proven effective in actual battle. Groups of three warriors of darkness were essentially machines of slaughter when faced with ordinary enemies.

A deep yet melodious voice rang out in everyone's ears, its tempo fast yet stable. The impassioned rhythm brought forth the last dregs of one's power, allowing the soldiers to fight longer without growing fatigued. Their reactions grew nimble, and their strength increased. Warsongs that could stimulate one's potential were the reason bards were so important in warfare. Even though the reasoning might seem a little far-fetched, it made Olar an indispensable part of the army.

Elven warsongs weren't passed down very often, normally only mastered by shamans. Even a grade 1 song could boost one's strength and agility by 10% or so, and when applied to an entire

army that was a huge addition to capability. The bard didn't disclose where he had learnt the warsong from, but they were almost as effective as those of a true shaman. His rich bloodline and abilities allowed him to boost the army's strength and agility by 8%, in a range of about fifty metres. This was a much larger area than a group buffing spell from a mage.

Given that Richard had about 500 subordinates, Olar's contribution to their capabilities far surpassed that of any soldiers. Only after a few more levels would Richard and Flowsand have the group buffs to compete.

Richard quickly took command of his troops, sending spells in all directions. These were mostly foundational, to supplement other spells he would cast in the future. In a battlefield of thousands, it wasn't easy to turn around a situation with even fifty direwolves, forget a mere five. Every second he had to observe the battlefield, analysing the situation before he sent commands to the wind wolves he was linked to. He was constantly mobilising and redirecting different groups, many times having to shout his commands to achieve his goals.

Under that meticulous command, the chaotic battlefield instantly stabilised and skewed towards Richard's army as it slowly exhibited its prowess.

Zendrall had already sent three groups of undead warriors out into the battlefield, and a fourth was on its way. The two trolls were at the peak of their ferocity, running around the chaotic battlefield as they wreaked havoc with their sturdy bodies and heavy hammers. Gangdor was also drenched in blood, having returned to Richard's side after a large group had broken through the front lines. He hadn't faltered despite a rain of attacks, leaving a mountain of corpses in his wake.

Waterflower was like a ghost, occasionally, popping out of the darkness with a breathtaking attack. Every time the Shepherd of Eternal Rest flashed on the battlefield, one of the stronger bandits

would perish.

As the battle tipped in their favour, the army converged and dispersed to eventually form ten or so small teams that served different functions. They weaved between the opponents under Richard's command, taking many out before returning to Flowsand to be healed. After some time, they would join the battle once more. Once the advantage was on their side, there was no going back.

However, an inconspicuous bandit suddenly took out a whistle and blew on it resolutely. The piercing sound resounded throughout the area, and the bandits turned around and fled at top speed as they showcased their prowess at sudden attacks and retreats. Only ten or so of them lagged behind, and they were quickly attacked and kicked off their horses.

Once the battle came to a close, Richard could estimate the losses on both sides without even inspecting the battlefield. The 500 bandits had left behind a hundred or so corpses, with more than ten heavily injured warriors that would soon be put to death. On their side, a little more than ten people had perished, most of them desert warriors. There were also sixty-odd injured soldiers, mostly barbarians and half-orcs.

Because Flowsand was around, the victims needed only one or two days to recuperate fully. However, this would quickly consume her mana. The opponents definitely wouldn't give them the time to recuperate after that.

This was the wolves' strategy. Many of them pounced down on the army and left numerous small wounds, some trying to chomp down on larger chunks. Even though some of them were killed, it was of no concern to the entire pack. This prey was always smaller than them, and many of the wolves didn't mind their numbers being reduced anyway.

Nobody had a single ounce of sympathy for the bandits who had

died at the army's hands. Not even their peers who had similarly been killed would care, because of one simple line of reasoning—every man down was one less person to share the loot with. It meant everyone else got more in the end.

Richard patrolled the campsite, only to find that it had become a land of massacre. The soldiers were already experienced with cleaning up battlefield, expertly inspecting the corpses and looting anything of value. They then sent the corpses to Zendrall, allowing the necromancer to use them to summon undead.

The desert warriors used their machetes to cut down all the horses that were heavily injured, having them collapse at the side. They then cut the creatures' veins open, draining the blood into buckets before filling numerous cups and distributing them to everyone.

Someone passed Richard a cup as he passed, and without even looking at it much he gulped the contents down. The blood was viscous and smelled of iron, but at the same time was scalding hot. Just like the red blood that this entire area had been dyed in.

Book 2, Chapter 118

Tug Of War

The battlefield was cleared very swiftly, and Richard mounted his horse as he led the sleepy army away with the bandits following behind. The rest of their journey proved to be a long and arduous tug of war, as the two entered a constant cycle of clashing and separating. The army's march was erratic, first advancing northeast before they turned north after a few kilometres.

The large barbarians couldn't ride horses, but thankfully they could move fast and had great endurance. However, they couldn't compare to the short horses of the Bloodstained Lands. These horses were well-suited to the desert folk; although they weren't great at short charges, their endurance and adaptability far surpassed the large horses from the human kingdoms.

The troops marched at average speed, with the wind wolves keeping close watch a few hundred metres away. Given their keen sense of smell and their heightened perception, Richard had a rough grasp of everything a kilometre around them. This was a good measure that allowed him to constantly adjust the direction of the army.

His final destination was far up north, in the lands of the Iron Triangle Empire. The Schumpeters' base was most likely there, and within it an important Lighthouse of Time. Moreover, it was in a mountainous region filled with dense forest and a large amount of fierce magical beasts. Given the complicated terrain, the pursuing troops would have no way of demonstrating the strength of their numbers while Richard's own troops could use their strengths to the utmost. After all, himself, Flowsand, and his core party were Richard's strongest trump card.

Even now Richard had no idea how the pursuing bandits managed to track him down without mistake every time. He also

didn't understand how they had quietly gathered such a large number of troops. The first small engagements hadn't raised much suspicion, but the attacks had soon grown unending and relentless. A few familiar faces were seen again and again, and Richard had sensed that his scattered enemies had banded together through unknown methods. He learnt that these people could ambush him instantly at any time and from any direction.

Richard's biggest advantage was that he had no reinforcements. He only fended off the attacks mechanically, relying solely on his knowledge of the situation to constantly maneuver his troops as he eluded the encirclement each time. He wanted to crush the pursuers, escaping the ring completely.

When he first started, Richard had moved steadfastly towards the north. However, it had grown increasingly apparent that the enemies knew of his intentions, and the presence up north was much more obvious than elsewhere. Thus, he had decisively changed his path, making a sudden attack on the east and crushing the opposition in that direction. He then used the chance to escape the Red Cossack troops, forcing them to lag behind him.

As such, the wolf pack and its prey had traded blows. Both sides seemed to have reached their objectives; Richard was forced off his path, but he had also managed to escape Red Cossack's trap. He also dealt heavy casualties to the enemy.

It went without saying that the scale of the battle was growing bigger every time. Besides trying to drive Richard further away from the Iron Triangle Empire, Red Cossack was also trying to force him off common trade routes. To the best of their knowledge, he had no foundation in the Bloodstained Lands. This made it difficult for him to seek substantial reinforcements, but it would not be hard for him to send news out. Red Cossack did not have the ability to shut down the entire intelligence network in the Bloodstained Lands, so they had to stop the news from spreading before Richard's backers found out. Killing this arrogant joker who

dared to challenge their prestige wasn't worth it if the hunt ended in a war.

Realising their intentions, Richard had immediately worked to do what he could to stay on common roads. Even if he couldn't hit the main road, he tried to ensure that he hit all the smaller routes he could. Of course he didn't have any information to convey, but he could use it to control the enemy's deployment. It also meant the occasional addition of manpower and supplies.

He passed two small caravans in his travels, quickly persuading them to give him their supplies and guards. Red Cossack was hot in pursuit behind him, and if they were spotted they would inevitably be wiped out. Such things were quite commonplace in the Bloodstained Lands; the large slaving groups often moonlighted as horse bandits.

Despite constantly losing men, Richard still had almost five hundred soldiers under his charge. If soldiers were ore, war was the best of furnaces. Some of the ore became strong metal under the flames, while the rest would become waste. Of course, 'waste' in the Bloodstained Lands was corpses.

As they continued to head north, Richard was quietly analysing his military strength. Altogether, an army of 821 had fallen down to 460. However, the ones who survived had grown to be cool-headed yet fierce warriors. As for him, his reward for the constant outstanding leadership was that his blessing of wisdom had advanced by a level.

There was little difference between the new grade of blessing and the old, the only enhancements being to his thinking speed and memory. In essence, he now had near photographic memory and could process much more of the information he was acquiring. The originally messy formations had grown much more organised, and his orders were now faster and clearer than ever. Consequently, his control of the battlefield had reached new heights.

An army of a few hundred soldiers was the best Richard could ask for at the present moment. It would allow him to perfectly display his commanding prowess. However, a clear train of thought and reaction was one thing, but drawing accurate conclusions was another matter altogether. Accurate strategic decisions had little to do with processing ability; the boost to the blessing only allowed for a smaller number of errors made in a hurry.

Even so, the effects clearly showed. The army had completely grown used to Richard's command at this point, gelling together to form a cohesive unit. Just like during the earlier surprise attack, the troops would be prepared very quickly to form an invincible battlefront. This group of warriors from different races and backgrounds had been tempered, transformed into a well-oiled machines that destroyed enemies at an alarming rate.

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About a hundred kilometres behind Richard, a train of carriages was making its way through the desolate desert.

This was no regular caravan. There were a few scarlet red carriages in the midst that ferried passengers, with an unassuming yet luxurious carriage that was drawn by a huge horse. The carriage's four wheels were enhanced with shock-absorbing magic, making the rider feel like they were floating over even the most bumpy of roads.

Even if one were to ignore labour, the materials of the carriage alone were worth tens of thousands of gold coins. It definitely wasn't just for comfort over long journeys. It was actually a magical war-carriage, used to provide a quiet and stable environment for mages during journeys to allow them to recuperate their mana. The interior of the carriage held a magic circle that could be activated with magic crystals, boosting the results of meditation.

The powerful mages of Norland had no need for such vehicles,

while great mages and the like were too poor to afford one. Only in Faelor where mages had unusual status did such things appear. Were Richard to see this, his perspective as someone from the Deepblue would naturally allow him to discern its true use— it was something that allowed the mage to boast of their wealth and status.

Book 2, Chapter 119

Salwyn

Inside the war-carriage was a mage who looked to be more than thirty years old. He wore luxurious robes that had strong enchantments, while his long white fingers had three rings with large rubies embedded in them. The constant magical glow was proof enough that these were magical artifacts, and undoubtedly premium products. The man himself was handsome with impeccably groomed facial hair, his demeanor radiating a sense of calmness and unbelievable confidence.

The interior of the carriage was extremely big, with a bed, table, and two cupboards. There were two beautiful young apprentices seated nearby; although their standards as mages weren't high, their purpose was not battle. They acted as the middle-aged mage's assistants, managing his messy documents and reports, and when required utilising their youthful bodies to help their master relax.

A large map was pinned onto the wall, covering the entirety of the Bloodstained Lands with extreme detail. It was ten times as accurate as the rest of the maps Richard had seen put together, not just containing information on inhabited regions like oases and streams but also about the distribution of power in different areas and the zones where slavers operated. Regional specialties, slaves, agricultural produce, ores... they were all clearly marked.

Such a map had immense value. It had slowly been drawn up and refined by Red Cossack at the cost of innumerable gold coins and countless lives.

At that moment, there was a knock on the carriage. Getting the mage's permission, an experienced warrior opened the door and passed several reports over to the two apprentices, who opened the envelope and passed them to the middle-aged man after some inspection.

The reports were quite detailed, densely packed into three pages. However, it took a mere half minute for the mage to scan through everything and grasp the crux of the situation, “Saul’s cavalry suffered heavy losses. They lost 112 soldiers while killing thirty enemies, with almost a hundred soldiers... Argh, this fellow isn’t telling the truth. The enemy should only have sustained half the damage he’s reporting at most...”

The mage stood up from his table, making his way to the map. Performing some quick calculations, he used a magical pen to draw an outline of the battlefield, filling in numbers. He then knitted his brows, deep in thought.

The inside of the carriage had gone quiet. The two young ladies consciously slowed their breathing, trying to avoid disrupting the mage’s reflections. They were perfectly aware that the esteemed Salwyn hated being disturbed while he was thinking.

In Faelor, grand mages were mostly level 16, with some exceptions at level 15. Anyone who could discharge powerful grade 8 spells had a qualitative leap in battle capabilities. Correspondingly, the title of great mage was granted to those at level 11, who could cast grade 6 spells that could hurt groups. That was the point at which mages started showing their prowess in a small battlefield.

In a battlefield of a thousand people, even if they weren’t useless grade 6 spells couldn’t significantly affect the outcome of a battle. However, this did not affect the high status of a great mage. Mages weren’t merely good for the tasteless art of murder; their main ability was in the production of powerful magical artifacts. Besides, any mage who had lived a long life could not be looked down on. Their personal capabilities may not be great, but they would have accumulated a large number of scrolls over their lifetime. Even in Norland, the mages of a fortress had so many scrolls they were the biggest powers on the battlefield.

Even though Salwyn was a level 12 mage, his status outside of

that was much higher, something quite uncommon in Faelor. He was a prince of the Iron Triangle Empire, famed for his strategic abilities. For someone so reputed to be commanding the Red Cossack troops in the Bloodstained Lands, the empire would go into an uproar if news got out.

He quietly performed some calculations before drawing a line on the map, indicating that the enemies would flee northeast from the battlefield. He then drew three arrows, indicating the possible directions of escape. He also made an obvious mark on the northern arrowhead, something that would greatly shock Richard if he saw it—the route this mage had marked was almost exactly the one he had chosen to take.

There were ten wolf heads on the map surrounding this route. All of a sudden, the number of bandits sent out to capture Richard had now increased to 5000. This was an extremely formidable force, but with the speed of Richard's army he managed to escape the encirclement time and time again.

Moreover, the terrain of the Bloodstained Lands was vile and complicated, with other powers scattered all over forming an additional obstacle. There were some camps that Richard wanted nothing to do with, and it wasn't feasible for Red Cossack to destroy every force they saw.

Salwyn took out a piece of paper, writing down the latest casualty counts on both sides. Needless to say, some adjustments needed to be made for the inflated number of deaths on Richard's end. Once he was done updating the numbers, a shocking ratio showed itself. Red Cossack had lost 2300 men, while Richard had lost only 310.

This nearly 8:1 ratio was extremely shocking to witness. It was clear that these armies were not of similar capability.

Salwyn was well aware that there were no level 12 warriors in Richard's army, and yet he'd sent one or two such men as the

commander of each wave. He had superior numbers, stronger warriors, and endless battles to tire Richard's troops out. Yet, even then the result was this lopsided; it was something he found unbelievable.

Looking at these numbers, one would think Richard was the one chasing, not him.

Salwyn was aware that Richard had priests and mages on his side, but he assumed the few he had wouldn't make a great difference to the outcome of the battle. Besides, a bulk of his army was made of desert warriors and barbarians. The capability of slave armies had been documented countless times in history; Salwyn himself was confident in killing a thousand desert warriors with a few hundred elites.

However, the truth that was in front of him toppled his acknowledgment of customs. Most of Richard's losses were slaves, and still he'd been hurt far less than the theoretical minimum.

The core of Salwyn's strategy was to put a constant pressure on Richard, attacking relentlessly until his enemy was pushed to the limit. The battles would slow the fleeing army down, and eventually his encirclement would be complete. That would allow him to use his powerful forces to decimate Richard's troops. However, despite the uneven numbers he didn't hit his two main targets. He was still engaged in a game of cat and mouse.

As such, he had come to conclude that Richard was a gifted tactician. Fighting him with equal numbers in a battlefield was as good as committing suicide.

Despite all those thoughts, though, Salwyn still stroked his beard as he happily muttered to himself, "This Richard is a rare opponent! Even that old joker Rislant couldn't have managed such a thing in his younger days. However, you've met your match with me; just blame your luck. Let me teach you a thing or two about the difference between strategy and tactics. You can win a few

more battles, the more you win the closer you get to death. You want to escape to the mountains? Good, then the mountain range will be your grave!”

Book 2, Chapter 120

Salwyn

Salwyn hooked a wolf-head pin with his pen, placing it in the north to block Richard's front. He then moved the other wolf heads around, ensuring that the east and west were surrounded. Only a single troop was left in the south, slowly following behind Richard as he went. Salwyn himself tagged along with this unit.

The Iron Triangle Empire was to the north of the Bloodstained Lands, indicated by three humanoid skeletons. They looked like a pocket that was waiting for Richard to get in. The closer Richard's army got to the location, the smaller the chances that they would change route. Sometimes, victory and defeat could be determined by a single wrong move.

He thoroughly looked over the map, about to give out new orders, but suddenly frowned. Richard's route on the map ended up being a series of complex S shapes. Although it looked like he was doing his best to escape north, he had only moved thirty kilometres north since the start, compared to an entire two hundred kilometres east.

Looking at the route, he felt a bad premonition stirring up in his heart, "This is wrong! Is it that he doesn't want to go north and instead consume my resources through guerilla warfare? Damn it, the number of casualties is already so high! This mob isn't the same as the soldiers of the empire, the death rate will cow them until they're scared of the slightest thing. We need to be fast!" He took another look at the map, observing the terrain around Richard's current position.

At that moment, the magical clock in his carriage rang out with a melodious alarm. His apprentices reminded him that it was time for lunch, so he stopped pondering and placed his pen down before he alighted from the carriage with them in tow. The caravan came

to a halt, resuming quickly after he boarded another carriage.

The dining table inside this new carriage was already covered with a thin, snow-white tablecloth that was made of flax. A sumptuous lunch had already been placed atop it, alongside pure silver cutlery. This carriage was actually a dining car!

Also amongst the carriages was one meant specifically for his rest and meditation, alongside some others that transported supplies as well as two carriages that accommodated the chefs and maids.

Salwyn's lunch lasted a full two hours before he returned to his carriage. This wasn't normally a waste of time; he used the opportunity to think and receive visitors. However, when he returned he found new reports that immediately made him frown.

Richard, who was initially heading north, had suddenly turned east. He'd plowed through the troops there, leaving no traces behind. The battle had been short yet intense, with more than 150 of the 500-man troop guarding the direction dying before they were forced to withdraw. With the high death toll, there was no way of scouting Richard's next direction.

Once the battle had come to an end, the reinforcements found only a few bodies that belonged to Richard's army, a majority of them being desert warriors.

"East... Was his true goal to return to the Sequoia Kingdom?" Salwyn grew unsure. The earliest reports of Richard's position were towards the borders of the Sequoia Kingdom. Generally he would want to prevent the foe from heading back to his homeland, but it was no secret that everyone in the Bloodstained Lands was more than meets the eye. It was obvious to him that Richard had wanted to go north at the start; based on his intuition, he did not think this was a false trail.

Furthermore, the results of the battle itself were incredible. It was normally impossible for troops of that caliber to kill a hundred and fifty experienced soldiers in a mere ten minutes. Salwyn

quickly decided that he had to view Richard's commandership in person. He instructed his assistants to prepare horses and magic scrolls, telling the guard leader to choose fifty of their best warriors to accompany him to the frontlines of the battle.

However, this decision was met with tactful resistance on the part of the two female mages. They felt that the absence of adequate protection would make it a dangerous mission, and this was a hunt that had been conceived at the last minute. Salwyn had been thrilled by the prey, thus taking over command from Red Cossack's members. This had already delayed them greatly; if Salwyn were put in danger during the mission, they would most likely be executed when they returned to the empire.

In their point of view, a possible heir to the throne like Salwyn was a thousand times more important than some unknown group of thieves.

The guard leader took the assistants' side. He was more firm and blunt, stating directly that nothing was more important at that moment than vying for the title of emperor. The secret forces of the empire had already headed south, there was no time to be distracted by other issues. This guard leader had been a trusted aide for many years, causing the mage to hesitate.

At that moment, two swift horses raced towards them carrying scouts with information to report. It made the normally calm prince frown.

First was that the Iron Triangle Empire's secret forces had met up with two marquesses and the forces of the Church of Valour, together forming a 2000-strong contingent with 200 paladins, 200 imperial knights, and more than ten priests that were awaiting his command.

The next was even more urgent. The black demons from a foreign plane had broken into Twilight Oasis, killing more than 2000 people and enslaving the rest to form an army of more than

3000.

“Three thousand!” Salwyn laughed mockingly, “Looks like these friends from afar issued a weapon to anyone who can move. Alright, let me look at the map...”

Standing in front of the large map that indicated the location of his troops, Salwyn looked towards Twilight Oasis and sighed, instructing the caravan to turn around as they headed towards their camp. He was already deep into the northern portions of the Bloodstained Lands. He needed to set out immediately to rendezvous with the secret forces, lest he be attacked by these enemies.

Salwyn reluctantly looked at the various marks he had made all over the northern Bloodstained Lands, letting out a deep sigh. These marks signified battle after suffocating battle, with numerous plot twists and unexpected outcome. The pack of wolves he had sent had left their bite marks on the prey, but the prey only sustained superficial wounds while the predator's teeth were ruined.

“Richard.. You better live on! Once I get the chance, I will show you what strategic dominance is all about, haha!” Salwyn shook his head. Richard was a gifted general in his eyes, but not a true commander. However, he himself was a commander over all others, one vying to be a monarch. He only needed a bit of effort and luck. The Iron Triangle Emperor was short lived, and there were more than seventy princes who wished to succeed him.

The fleet made a beautiful red arc in the desert, swiftly turning southeast. A few swift horses passed the news to the roaming wolf pack, passing command back to those of Red Cossack.

Book 2, Chapter 121

Turning Around

Richard was sitting under the shade of a stone cliff in a withered stone forest, recuperating with his eyes closed. His mana was being restored bit by bit, but right now he was only half full. As for the other two mages, both Tiramisu and Zendrall were only at a third of capacity. Even more worrisome was that Flowsand was only left with a third of her own power. Half of her scrolls had been used up, leaving her with less than thirty on hand. Many of those were still blank, yet to be scribed.

Even the desert warriors who were normally known for their endurance and stamina had started to show signs of fatigue. Many of them had fallen to the ground, entering deep sleep. Quite a few of the barbarians were wounded as well, but Flowsand didn't have the energy to care about flesh wounds. Only fifteen of the half-orc warriors were left standing.

All but nine of Richard's wind wolves had perished. These spawns of the broodmother were ten times as important as any other level 7 underling; their link to his mind was the sole reason Richard could control several hundred people like his own arms.

At this point, the capabilities of the troops had entered an all time low. Richard had ordered all of his party to burst forth with full strength in the most recent battle, resulting in a swift decimation of the opposing forces that left more than a hundred of the five hundred bandits dead. The opponents hadn't been able to mount a good defense, eventually dispersing in confusion.

This was an outcome that Richard had chosen. After the long tug of war, he could roughly predict where the familiar groups would be stationed. He sent his wind wolves out to determine their position, decisively pulling his entire army east and pouncing on the bandits who were only supposed to fight them two rounds

later.

Given Red Cossack's encirclement, it was extremely risky to take the initiative to attack you. Another group of well-prepared forces was always nearby, getting ready for the next ambush. If the blitzkrieg was met with a stalemate, Richard would have been pincered from two ends.

Fortunately, the battle had developed in his favour. His contracted party had fought without reservation, achieving far greater results than expected. The rest of his men abandoned all other pursuits, focusing on changing their direction. Even though this had left them at their weakest point, Richard was sure the enemies weren't much better off.

He opened his eyes, silently estimating the time that had passed as he stood up with the support of the rock behind him. His entire body was stiff, the six unhealed wounds on his back and shoulders still aching dully. One wouldn't even know the original colour of his robe anymore; it had hardened up like leather and grown red. Sweat and blood had blended with the characteristic red soil of the Bloodstained Lands, soil that had acquired its colour as blood constantly seeped into the ground and dried up.

Richard's mouth was filled with an unpleasant taste. He spat out two clumps of sand, the horse blood still churning in his gut making him feel like he was burning up from within. He felt the constant urge to clear his stomach of its contents.

He chose to ignore that need, combing his hair as he inhaled deeply. The vitality rune was slowly replenishing his strength and mana, allowing him to force his eyes open and flash a refreshed grin. He then made his way to the soldiers who were sprawled on the ground everywhere, barking loudly, "All of you, wake up! Get ready for battle! Let's show those bastards who are chasing us what we're made of!"

Hearing his loud call, many of the soldiers immediately got up

and grabbed their weapons, preparing for war. The continuous battles had elevated his status in their hearts, making him a divine existence. They instinctively followed his every command.

Although the mere half hour of rest was not enough, they still clambered up as fast as they could, rushing to the wind wolves in charge of them. A few were simply too tired and deep in slumber, but a few kicks got them on their feet.

A few minutes later, the entire army hid itself within the forest. Sand started blowing in from the horizon not long after, as a troop of horse bandits came bounding towards Richard while following the trail. This was about as expected, making Richard pleased with the increased calculative ability from his blessing growing. His grasp of the situation was now stronger than ever before.

Light was just starting to leak into the sky. The very fact that these soldiers could accurately follow his trail in the dim morning light told Richard that their leader was quite skilled.

There weren't many soldiers in this group, only 200 or so. They looked like they were newly formed, with a foreign flag and outfits, but Richard could clearly feel that some of the desert warriors and barbarians were starting to feel a little shaken. There was a mix of fear and strong hatred on their faces.

That reaction told Richard that this group consisted mostly of slavers. With that in mind, he started to plan the engagement in his head...

As they were nearing the stone forest, the leader of the slavers suddenly stopped his horse. Many years of battle had sharpened his intuition, and he could feel extreme danger coming from the stone forest ahead.

However, the moment he stopped his horse a sharp arrow from the darkness shot straight for his heart. The shot was extremely crafty and dangerous, leaving the leader with no time to respond. He reined his horse in immediately, causing it to stand and take

the shot for its master. Suddenly, the slaver saw a young girl dressed in white float past him from at the corner of his sight. Startled by the inexplicable sight, he looked around to search for her, but she had disappeared.

The leader suddenly felt a slight chill run down his back, quickly extending to the rest of his body. All energy seemed to drain out of him in the next moment, and he blacked out and fell from his horse.

Seeing the opposing commander brutally murdered. Richard promptly started commanding the wind wolves and knights to charge out from within the forest and counter the attack. A mass slow from him and a fear spell from Zendrall impacted the enemy cavalry moments before the melee, leaving at least thirty of them in turmoil.

“They have a mage!” one of Richard’s knights shouted. Some people on the enemy side tried to warn their mage of the danger, but the man had only just started on a spell before he was beheaded by Waterflower who had appeared out of the blue. The mage’s four guards ended up being completely useless.

The two armies clashed violently. The chaotic battlefield was like a chessboard in front of Richard’s eyes, every piece under his control. The movements of his pieces allowed him to even influence the opponent.

As with the last battle, this one was short yet intense. The slavers. Although individually powerful, had met with an ambush that killed their commander early into the battle. They immediately went into retreat, quickly leaving a hundred corpses behind as they escaped. Richard himself hadn’t been able to escape injury, with ten of his men laid to eternal rest in this forest. Yet, he couldn’t afford to care. They cleaned up the battlefield in a mere ten minutes before he took his troops and sped north.

This was tens of kilometres away from his original route. Even if

the enemies had an ambush up north, Richard believed they couldn't move over in time.

Book 2, Chapter 122

Spectator

The next three hours, the team rapidly moved through the desert to arrive at a towering mountain range. They had encountered a single attack in the entire duration, easily defeating the opponent and killing more than thirty of their number. Once that battle had come to a close, they had remained safe from nightfall to the next dawn.

Richard frowned as their vanguard reached the foot of the mountain range. He stared south towards the Bloodstained Lands, growing silent.

“Why did you stop, boss?” Gangdor asked from beside Richard, taking down a waterskin from his horse and shaking it hard before he took a few big gulps.

A familiar, tart smell assaulted Richard’s nostrils. The waterskin was filled with horse blood, and half of it had coagulated at this point. It was giving off a rancid odour.

“Have everyone rest here, we wait for the enemy.”

The warriors got off their horses one after the other and laid down on the ground, many falling asleep immediately. Those who used magic took the chance to meditate, restoring their mana.

Richard was still pondering over the situation. Countless thoughts ran through his mind as he made innumerable deductions in a short span of time.

Ever since they’d changed tactics and charged out, the bandits’ movements had grown extremely strange. Regardless of what their motive was, it seemed like the situation was swayed into his favour. The fewer encounters gave his army much needed rest, and when they did come the attackers didn’t have great morale. The weaker spirits of the bandits allowed them to get away with far

fewer casualties.

Richard squinted as he looked at the foot of the hills at the north. What was waiting ahead? His gaze soon shifted southeast, to the stone forests of the Bloodstained Lands. No one would have expected that to be his true destination.

The moment he realised their army had been caught up in the wolf pack tactic, Richard had changed his strategy. He used guerilla warframe to deplete Red Cossack of their warriors, and planned to follow the eastern border of the Bloodstained Lands to detour back to Camp Bloodstone. The broodmother was still moving around in the vast mountain range there, having become the overlord of the area. It had devoured many level 12 and 13 beasts, accumulating an army of hundreds of wind wolves and it could spawn more and more every day. It wasn't far off from levelling up again.

Richard had planned to converge in the mountains near Camp Bloodstone, waging a war of life and death with Red Cossack. However, the situation had strangely changed over the past day and night...

Richard closed his eyes hard and tried to clear his head, concentrating on meditation. The most important thing right now was the upcoming battle. If his tactics couldn't prevail, strategy wouldn't even matter.

The wait was an entire two hours. His warriors managed to get a good rest, even having time to roast and eat horse meat. They had recovered greatly by the time he saw the surge of dust on the horizon, a cavalry troop charging in the distance.

However, their path was perpendicular to his. It wasn't until a sharp-eyed scout noticed an anomaly in their direction that the leader whistled. They adjusted direction, but stopped a few kilometres away from him. It was as though they were unsure of whether to attack head-on or split up flank him.

In the more than ten days of constant battle, this was the first time that Richard had encountered such a situation. His troops were well-rested, and his enemies were in disarray. Recalling how a 300-man troop retreated after losing only a tenth of their numbers, Richard suddenly smiled as he pointed at the bandits, “Let’s send them packing!”

The warriors got up immediately, the barbarians forming a neat frontline and starting to advance. The cavalry on both sides started flanking towards the left and right. The desert warriors were like hungry wolves that ripped into the charging opponents, tearing the enemy formation apart.

The horse bandits were quickly flustered, and a whistle sounded quite quickly causing them to turn around and escape. Their prey was no longer exhausted, having regained the ferocity of a beast. Past experience told them that the only outcome of taking this fight would be the complete destruction of their side.

The difference in ability between Salwyn and Red Cossack’s men was like night and day. The sheer number of losses had accumulated to a breaking point, completely crushing their morale.

Richard decided to lead his troops north. Although he originally wished to loop around to Camp Bloodstone, exploring the mountain range at the border of the Iron Triangle Empire was just as important. As long as there was an opportunity, it was worth trying. He thought over the recent battle repeatedly, eventually flashing a clear and relaxed smile as he figured it out, “Our opponent seems to have changed. That’s good.”

Although he didn’t know what exactly happened, the mysterious person manipulating this pack of wolves had disappeared. Red Cossack was back to being a bunch of hunting expeditions that were as loose as sand. This was great news. The tightening hold over them had relaxed once more; whatever the reason was, whatever conspiracy their pursuer had been embroiled in, was

none of his concern. As long as he could preserve his army's core strength and find the Schumpeter base in the mountains, that would be a great victory.

The constant fighting was an iron hammer that had tempered his heart, the harsh battles constantly strengthening his will. Now, Richard had a natural dignity to each of his gestures. He still didn't speak much, but each of his words was concise and direct. The elven beauty he had inherited from his mother had been ground away, his face no longer as refined and delicate.

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"Do you sense anything?" Richard asked Flowsand. They had already entered the mountain range, his judgement on the change in Red Cossack ringing true.

Flowsand had the Book of Time in her hands, a pale gold hourglass slowly rotating on the page. She stared at it for a while before pointing northwest, "There are strong spacetime fluctuations in that direction."

"Alright, we'll head there and have a look." Richard waved his troop forward, and they disappeared into the vast forest...

Once night fell, the warriors built tents and lit a bonfire on a gentle slope. Magical beasts that they had hunted were washed clean in a stream, roasted by the fire. When the fragrance of roasted meat diffused into the air, the camp suddenly burst into cheers! They hadn't bathed in more than ten days, nor even drunk clean water. Being able to bite into a piece of hot, greasy meat would be heavenly.

Richard finally had a bath. Although the forest stream was chilling to the bone, it washed away the grime that had accumulated over the past weeks. It made him feel so comfortable he wanted to moan.

They were at a hidden alcove upstream from the camp. The river

curved here, the flow relatively mild. Flowsand was cleaning up right beside him. Seeing her beautiful amber features and the rune tattoo that had integrated into her body, Richard couldn't stop himself from helping her wash. Halfway through the process he dragged her up the bank, pushing her down. A unique sound of intense pants sounded out as a battle began at the side of the stream.

They had only just begun when Richard's body suddenly stiffened. "Someone's peeking," he whispered.

Flowsand squinted her eyes, asking with a soft moan, "Who?"

"Waterflower." The soulguard couldn't hide her position from him. And even if he didn't know her position, nobody but her could get so close without him noticing.

Flowsand's body suddenly heated up, and she started moving violently, "Let her see!"

Richard had never been watched during the act before. It was a strange feeling, giving him an unusual sense of excitement. He snarled loudly, becoming as ferocious as a beast himself...

An hour had passed by the time Richard and Flowsand returned to camp. Waterflower had watched them for the entire duration, only leaving quietly when Richard stood up.

Book 2, Chapter 123

An Effortless Attack

Most of the soldiers had already filled their stomachs up by the time Richard returned, washing up downstream before they returned to their tents to sleep slowly. They were already used to sleeping at any time; anyone who wasn't on patrol or night watch slipped into slumber quickly.

Someone had placed a plate of roasted meat in front of Richard's tent, alongside a piping hot bowl of meat soup. Just a whiff of the delicious aroma told him this was cooked by the trolls, so he ate to his heart's content.

Both his mind and body were currently relaxed. Contrary to expectations, he was in great spirits with no hurry to sleep. He thus took out the runes he had retrieved from the bearguard knights, beginning to repair them. Some ended up unusable, but most of them would work.

By the time the night passed, Richard had five strength and a single defense rune on hand. The boosts varied from 15% to 25%, a far cry from their original effects but still divine compared to the goods he sold to those of Faelor.

He left a single 15% strength rune untouched, while he attached the rest to slots and slotted them onto the Archeron knights. Only five of them were left; the only one at level 11 got both a strength and defense rune, while the youngest got nothing. With the boost in power from the runes, the power of the rest was boosted and stabilised at the calibre of level 11.

Richard led his troops through the boundless hills and woods, all of them stronger than ever before. They walked for five days before finally managing to locate Sinclair's base.

Unlike their own, this was an enormous base that was

comparable to a small city. The towering Lighthouse of Time was extremely striking, just as striking as the Mensa Family's crest on the wide open gates. However, it was extremely quiet. If one looked through the gates, they would see not a soul in sight. It seemed to be a ghost town.

The base was located on an open plain that was out of place in the middle of the dense forest. Richard didn't enter right away, remembering the circumstances when he had first reached Faelor. He stationed a majority of his troops in the distance, personally leading his direct subordinates who were used to forest battles and five of the wind wolves as he began to search the surroundings.

That decision proved to be fruitful. They found a small army camp not far away, with about a hundred soldiers, five paladins, and a young cleric. Looking at the crest on their robes, they were worshippers of Cerces. Richard had spent a lot of his time in the Bloodstained Lands learning about the gods of Faelor. In a certain sense, they would be his true arch enemies.

He later found traces of a portal and the remains of a battlefield on the other side. Although the place had been cleaned up, some of the permanent traces provided enough indication of how tragic the battle was. All of the dead bodies had disappeared, however. They were probably carried away by those of the church.

Richard quietly returned to his own camp, waiting until the dead of the night before stealthily leading his soldiers out under the cover of darkness. They surrounded the enemy camp, waiting until two past midnight before launching a surprise attack on the sleeping soldiers.

After the extremely arduous battles in the Bloodstained Lands, this surprise attack was so effortless it was startling. The normal soldiers woke up to a sword in their face, their first reaction being to kneel down in surrender. The paladins showed their usual spirit, fighting with their fists even if they had climbed out of bed naked. However, an impeccable will would not reverse the

situation in front of such brutal and vicious enemies.

When Richard stepped into the tent that the young cleric occupied, the youth had just sat up on his bed. He was still half asleep, unable to figure out what was happening.

The surprise attack ended in overwhelming victory. Not one of his men had suffered even minor injuries, while ten of the opponents had died before the rest surrendered. Three of the paladins had been killed in battle, while two more were knocked out before the battle stopped. As for the cleric, he had surrendered as well.

Seeing the results of the battle, Richard shook his head in resignation. Repeated battles on the edge of death had toughened up his subordinates, making every blow of theirs fierce and violent. Now the problem was that they often couldn't stop themselves in time. As such, more opponents were killed than injured.

Richard had his soldiers clear up the battlefield, making an inventory of the spoils of war as he entered the cleric's tent and sat down. He had the cleric escorted over, beginning the interrogation.

Someone who surrendered without a fight certainly wouldn't have a strong will. The fellow wasn't of the sort to sacrifice his life for his faith, and he was exceptionally cooperative as he rapidly answered all of Richard's questions. This would surely affect the grace he was afforded, maybe even forcing him to drop in level, but to him that was a small price to pay to keep his life.

Kars was as young as he looked, only 22 years of age but already level 5. In the pantheon of Faelor, someone serving a greater god like Cerces could only be called a cleric at level 5, given independent charge of a task.

According to him, a great battle had ensued on the day that the invaders moved through the portal. The allied armies of the

greater god Ceres and the intermediate god Neian had suffered a crushing defeat, their battle priests and paladins completely wiped out. This was nearly the entire combined force of two large churches, severely diminishing their power.

Some time later, the church had joined with the Iron Triangle Empire to launch a second expedition. However, they discovered that the formidable invaders were nowhere to be found. They only found a base of unknown origin. Many priests, mages, and paladins as well as the commander went to investigate, but they were abruptly met with mishaps as people suddenly lost parts of their bodies to sudden, rapid aging. Some even died immediately.

Having paid a heavy price of nearly thirty lives, the army finally retreated from the base. It was only then that they realised the seemingly peaceful base was flooded with the chaotic energies of time. Any unassuming corner could be a death trap that no man could withstand. Even a saint level powerhouse had been lost to it.

The pope had thus declared this entire base dysfunctional, making it a forbidden ground because of the effects of the chaotic spacetime. He just had a group of soldiers stationed beside the base.

Guarding this base that was deep into the desolate mountains was unquestionably an arduous and unrewarding task, no different from being sent into exile. It was obvious that this handsome young man was in some sort of trouble if he was assigned to it. The reason he had set up a kilometre away from the base was that he was afraid of the chaotic energies leaking. A single trace of that energy could kill him, regardless of whether it was time energy or spatial energy.

Once the young cleric was done saying all he could, Richard finally looked him in the eyes and stated indifferently, "My name is Richard. I'm a frontier knight of the Sequoia Kingdom."

"Sequoia Kingdom!" Kars exclaimed, immediately aware of the

crisis he was in. The country founded by a legendary hero had a chaotic relationship with religion. Three churches existed within their borders, but more than half the population were atheists or worshipped their ancestors. Besides, none of the three gods they did worship was Cerces.

Kars had been cooperative all this while because he could tell that the other party was an aristocrat who didn't slaughter him. He assumed they had just stumbled upon this deserted and cursed place, having high hopes of freeing himself by letting the man take him as prisoner and turn him in as redemption. He'd never thought the other party wasn't someone of his empire, so the matter quickly grew complicated.

Richard thought for a moment before saying, "You should understand that I do not wish for anyone to know that I have showed up here, not to mention my attack towards Cerces's warriors. You have two options. Remain loyal to your god and sacrifice yourself, or change your faith and live on."

"Change my faith? You're a follower of the vile god Jadosh?!" Kars exclaimed, his face looking extremely pale.

"You have no need to know. You'll understand our god when you convert."

Kars seemed extremely frightened, his throat bobbed up and down as he swallowed, before he asked in a strained voice, "Will my divine power be burned?"

Richard nodded, "Becoming a fallen cleric is your only chance to survive"

Kars closed his eyes, going through a short internal struggle before nodding his head.

Book 2, Chapter 124

Purification

Although the burning of Kars' divine power was painful, it was quite brief. A wisp of gold flew out of the Book of Time and entered the young cleric's forehead, brimming with the power of the divine that strengthened him until he hit level 6. A faint golden radiance rushed out of his body, lingering on his person.

This result made Flowsand shake her head, while Richard was taken a little aback as well. Marvin had managed to go from level 3 to level 6, but Kars who was already level 5 couldn't do any better.

However, the aforementioned cleric did not know that the two people in front of him were quite dissatisfied with his advancement. He was rather surprised, not expecting at all that he could still advance to level 6. This new god had to be quite formidable, at least on par with Cerces!

However, there were only three greater gods on all of Faelor. If Kars had been diligent in his studies, he would have discovered instantly that this divine power belonged to no known god. However, that didn't matter; Flowsand would inform him of it all the same. Hearing the title of the Dragon of Eternity and Light, the fellow was clearly dumbfounded. He tried his best to recall, but the name didn't ring any bells.

Flowsand gave him a simple explanation that covered two basic points. Firstly, the Eternal Dragon was matchlessly formidable. As the name suggested, its powers transcended spacetime. Secondly, were Kars to betray the burning of his divine power would accelerate his aging. Every level would cost him ten years of his life. This damped the newly fallen cleric's excitement, warping it into astonishment instead.

However, at least he managed to stay alive. That was the only way the youth managed to console himself. He didn't really feel

any conflict against this new religion that claimed to pursue mysticism. It was quite common for clerics to secretly propagate their god's doctrine, and this divine power he felt was real. The aura of this new god was vast and dignified; it definitely wasn't some evil spirit.

What Kars cared more about was Richard's identity as an aristocrat of the Sequoia Kingdom. His own father was a baron from a historied family, but now his own status in that family was in shambles. The Sequoia Kingdom and Iron Triangle Empire weren't exactly at odds with each other, but they weren't steadfast allies either. Although there wasn't any war on a national level, armed conflicts were common at the borders. Besides, both countries were interested in the chaotic Bloodstained Lands; it was an open secret that powerful nobles on both ends had representatives there.

Nevertheless, the fallen cleric was rather optimistic. Having come to terms with reality, he didn't feel too dejected; his future prospects in the Church of Cerces had come to an end anyway. Richard questioned him about that, and he admitted that he'd seduced an earl's mistress.

Richard had nothing to say to that. His subordinates came from all sorts of backgrounds, being a mix of slaves, murderers, and heretics. As he walked out of the tent with Flowsand, he looked at the captive soldiers and realised that they were a thorny problem. "How should we deal with these people?" he asked her.

She thought over it for a moment before answering, "Let Kars handle it, he should know what to do."

Richard nodded, calling the fallen cleric out, "Kars!"

The youth immediately ran over to his side, asking if there were any orders. Richard pointed to the captive soldiers, "Think of a way to deal with them, you're not allowed to kill them all. You can't let them divulge my secrets either."

Kars looked reluctant, but he nodded his head and took the task upon himself. As such, Richard left some soldiers in the camp as he brought his party back to the Mensa base.

Flowsand walked into the base, reaching out to gently touch the gate. A wisp of golden light flew out, drifting in the air without any pattern. This stream of light was extremely beautiful, occasionally refracting at certain angles to form a rainbow of colour. However, Richard understood this was the power of time, an extremely dangerous thing that not even a grand mage or saint level powerhouse would willingly approach.

Flowsand lifted the Book of Time in the air, bringing it close to this light. The stream brightened for a moment, before dissolving into a puff of golden sand that sprinkled onto the book. They then seeped in like raindrops being absorbed by soil, the book itself growing a little brighter in the process.

Flowsand absorbed three scattered belts of time energy in a row, before proceeding to walk in. Every graceful step she took revealed one or more of these streams in the lifeless town, before dissolving them into golden grains. The entire base was lit up in a strange yet beautiful light.

The Mensa base was very large, and it took Flowsand an entire week to absorb all the power of time within. This also meant the death trap had been purified.

In the meanwhile, Richard had gone to camp to craft a rune. This one was a mana boost, prepared for himself. With the understanding he had of his own body, substantial changes had been made over a standard rune. The boost wasn't affected at all, but the demand for capacity was greatly reduced. The final product was an exquisite rune slot that was only the size of a palm.

When done, he took off his clothes and activated the rune by transferring some mana into the slot. He then placed the slot in front of his chest, smoke rising from his skin the moment it came

into contact as a thin layer was quickly burned away. The rune then fused into his skin, merging at a speed visible to the naked eye.

The entire process was extremely agonising. The skin the rune was attaching itself to experienced scorching pain, as though a red-hot iron had been placed upon it. By the time it finally finished fusing, he had to let out a deep breath as he wiped the cold sweat off his forehead.

A few gentle knocks sounded from the door at that moment, as Flowsand pushed the door open and walked in. Her gaze landed on the fresh hide on Richard's chest, and she stared at it blankly for a while before asking, "New rune?"

Richard nodded, "Mana boost, same as yours. This will be equivalent to another powerful spell in battle."

The cleric smiled gently, "I like that we're using the same rune. Also, guess what I found?"

She opened the Book of Time as she spoke, retrieving a torn page. The page stretched out the moment it left the book, growing to twice its initial size.

Book 2, Chapter 125

Upgrade

“So, it isn’t just one more spell at the highest rank,” Flowsand said with a smile, passing the page of the Book of Holding to Richard.

Richard couldn’t contain his joy as he took the page from her hands. He hadn’t expected to be able to see another page of the Book of Holding so quickly. The one sheet he got from the Church of Valour was already one of the most powerful magic items he had, and with two on hand now he could verify the information about its extraordinary powers. If the Book of Holding really would develop new powers after the two pages were combined, then it would be a priceless artifact.

“Where did you get this?” he asked doubtfully.

“I found it within one of the cracks in spacetime. It might have been floating around aimlessly and met the base when it was being shifted, being swept into this plane.” All of this was said calmly, but Richard was well aware that nobody but her could have retrieved the loose page even if they knew where it was. A crack in spacetime was one of the most dangerous things in existence.

“We must be really lucky!” Richard exclaimed.

Flowsand laughed in response, “I’m a cleric, and you’re blessed by the Eternal Dragon. There’s no way we’ll have bad luck. That’s a part of one’s ability.”

Richard spread the loose page on the table, placing it next to the one he already own. Before he could examine how to piece them together in detail, the two loose pages that were close to each other started glowing with mysterious light. They were pulled towards each other on their own, the light growing brighter as they approached. When they finally made contact, a blinding glare

flashed out and forced Richard to close his eyes.

By the time he opened his eyes once again, the two loose pages had already combined to form a thin book. On the cover was a half-missing picture, with vague spiral patterns that couldn't be deciphered. Two thick pages could be seen within, slightly yellow like aging parchment. The pages were pliable but tough.

Caressing the pages, he started to slowly gather mana to cast a normal detection spell. The usage and new abilities of the Book of Holding quickly appeared in his mind.

With the two loose pages combining, there was an extra spell slot and every spell could be up to grade 6. This meant a total of three grade 6 spells! With the current levels of the enemies they were fighting, that would be enough to completely reverse the situation. This was like the addition of half the power of a level 14 great mage.

The Mensa base still had large amounts of supplies. They were undoubtedly very valuable, but Richard couldn't use them. Just like the Archeron base, this one was right under the nose of a church and a regional ruler. The Church of Cerces would soon discover that their garrison there wasn't making the daily reports, and would examine the region. Richard didn't have dozens of bearguard knights under him; although his army had grown stronger over time, it would be too much of a stretch to fight a group of battle priests.

Having collected all the magical resources, Richard swapped out the equipment of his men for whatever was stored in the base. Sadly, the barbarians were far too large; there was no armour that would fit them. Some simple measures were taken instead, armour plates placed at their chests and backs and bonded together with pelts. He estimated that this change in equipment grew his army's prowess by at least 15%.

Another surprise was that all the captive soldiers joined

Richard's troops. Kars had used a method similar to Flowsand's own, having them pray non-stop in a seven day ceremony. However, these prayers weren't in praise of their god, but to curse Cerces. They would spit at their god's image repeatedly as well, and the seven days of cursing ended up shrouding them in an unnoticeable dark energy.

These soldiers were now blasphemers. The dark energy surrounding them would be clearly visible to any cleric of Cerces, and would be detected by anyone with powerful magic. If they dared to return and were caught, they would immediately be burnt at the stake. Even if they went forth and sought mercy, confessing everything, they would not escape punishment. It would only be considered their redemption.

As a greater deity, Cerces would not tolerate even the slightest of blasphemy. Repentance alone would never redeem them of their sins.

Richard could only shake his head at this 'contribution.' The order had been his, and the fallen cleric had completed his mission perfectly. With the exception of the two paladins, everyone had been tied onto his chariot. The paladins themselves had much stronger faith; they resisted the moment they stirred, ready to perish alongside the heretics. Richard was left with no choice but to have them killed.

Once they packed everything they could take, Richard led his troops away from the Mensa base and back towards the Sequoia Kingdom. It was time to finish his deal with the Direwolf Duke.

In the meanwhile, Richard was also prepared to look for an opportunity to draw the bearguard knights out to the open in the Bloodstained Lands. The Schumpeter troops were extraordinarily special, with no chance of integrating or masking themselves into the hierarchy of the plane. Thus, the endless battles in the Bloodstained Lands would undoubtedly weaken them significantly.

Now, with his identity as a frontier knight, Richard didn't mind using the influences of his plane to get rid of his enemies. He was well aware of how valuable the bearguard knights were; every one he killed was an additional blow to the Schumpeters. Richard wasn't afraid that they would not head south; his own presence there eventually would be too tempting for them not to take the bait.

Deep in his heart, Richard felt like there was no meaning to this war with the Schumpeters. However, he had no choice but to fight back. It was as if there was no end to those who wanted to kill him ever since he returned home. Even when on a foreign plane, there were people from Norland sent to take his life. Although he felt helpless about this, a ball of fury silently burned in his heart.

The troops silently marched along the eastern border of the Bloodstained Lands, heading south towards their destination. Along the way, Flowsand completely absorbed the power of time from the base and became a level 10 cleric. Even though that only allowed her to cast more grade 5 spells, the powers of her title had advanced.

The title of 'Daybreak' allowed Flowsand to decipher and borrow the divine powers of other gods. At the first level, she had the ability to strip away small amounts of divine power, and now she could both absorb more and use her own power to drive those of other gods. She could basically use the scrolls and divine items of other deities without having to alter them at all. All it would take was a small amount of her own power.

This was a frightening ability, one that caused Richard to reassess the clerics of the Eternal Dragon as a terrifying opponent. Not only could they use the powers of others, they would be able to analyse and dissect the power of their enemy. And he didn't even know what the title of First Light of Dawn granted high priestess Ferlyn. However, even as he evaluated Flowsand he forgot to consider his own blessings from Alucia, his talent, and the

broodmother...

Just as Richard was about to reach his destination, a rare war of great proportions was playing out in the Bloodstained Lands.

Book 2, Chapter 126

Unwilling Defeat

Salwyn was stood atop his carriage, gazing at the battlefield far ahead as he continuously yelled out orders. His voice was already amplified by his mana as much as possible, but in this battlefield full of death cries, yells, and world-shaking howls, his range was limited.

By this point, the great mage had already lost his calm grace. Sweat continuously dripped from his forehead, and despite the aid of magic his voice had grown hoarse from all the roaring. However, he himself was unaware of all this.

His loyal messengers were still shuttling between the carriage and the army like a stream, but facing the ever-changing battlefield even his orders were too difficult to execute accurately.

“Right wing! Hold the right wing, who let you send in the cavalry, withdraw! Don’t you see the back lines ready for the attack... Damn it, they already charged. Block... Tch... Send a team of imperial knights to the right wing and break their charge. Remember to take a cleric!”

Twenty imperial knights in bright armour started charging out from near the carriage after Salwyn’s roars, gradually speeding up until they reached maximum speed in a few hundred metres. They had already levelled their long lances, using the inertia to crack down on the bearguard knights who had broken through the frontlines on the right wing.

Two currents of steel clashed into each other, but the violent collision ended with the defeat of the imperial knights. The tall, strong men had encircled the bearguard knights, but the difference in power was far too great. Most of them were sent flying away alongside their horses as the enemy’s magical horses burst forth with unimaginable strength. There seemed to be no resistance

during the collision, as the black-armoured knights didn't pause for even a moment. They just sped up to chase the imperial knights who were thrown out, cutting many knights and their horses in two with their swords.

It was as though the bearguard had been possessed by a god of death, sweeping back and forth across the region until none of the imperial knights were left alive. The gap on the right wing grew even larger. Fortunately, these demons didn't seem able to withstand a long battle. They retreated after disrupting the right wing, and countless warriors in all sorts of attire began fighting in their place.

The right wing was embroiled in complete chaos. The bearguard knights had chiselled through the middle of their formation, ripping it apart and allowing a large number of fierce and extremely vicious warriors to break in.

When the allied armies of the Iron Triangle Empire and the churches of the Sequoia Kingdom couldn't hold on much longer, a ray of holy light poured out from the middle of the formation that was on the brink of breaking apart. It was like the warriors within had drunk potions, their spirit boosted as their strength, reflexes, and endurance were greatly enhanced. They immediately brought disastrous casualties to the enemy, even pulling two bearguard knights off their magical mounts.

Not far away, Sinclair squinted her eyes from atop her manticore's back, licking her lips lightly as she murmured, "The stench of magic again... I hate priests..."

She had neither joined the attack nor commanded the army this entire time. It seemed like she was a little girl who was out of her mind, standing blankly in position and repeatedly talking to herself. However, once she was done murmuring her silhouette suddenly disappeared. She maintained her posture from before disappearing when she returned, her expression still one of naive and innocent confusion, but she was right behind the only high-

ranking priest on the battlefield. She had moved hundreds of metres away from her original position, and now she looked around and screeched like a lost little girl as she fled to his side.

The small troop of paladins protecting the priest did not manage to respond in time. A petite, beautiful doll of a girl who was almost naked was screaming as she ran towards them, and nobody even thought of stopping her.

It looked like she didn't do anything, but the priest's magic was suddenly cut off. Soon after, the blessings he'd cast on the soldiers disappeared one by one. The priest was stunned, looking down at his chest only to see an unknown large hole in the luxurious and expensive robes he wore. The hole revealed a terrifying cavity in his exposed chest, with nothing inside.

Isn't that where the heart is supposed to be? With this last doubt, the priest lost all light in his eyes before rapidly collapsing onto his back. As for the little girl, a heart had unknowingly appeared in her hand.

However, this heart was not the priest's. That one was already in her stomach. She sniffed this one and threw it aside, before another heart miraculously appeared in her little hands once more. The warm heart was still beating tenaciously, unaware that it had left its owner.

Just like that, Sinclair's silhouette appeared and disappeared in this battlefield where thousands of people were killing each other. Her appearance was tender and delicate, completely at odds with the brutal fighting around her. She was just like a wilful little girl that was picking fruits from the trees along the way, taking a bite from the delicious ones and throwing away those that were not. It was just that any other little girl would probably be picking real fruits; she was picking her enemies' hearts. The soldiers she walked past suddenly paused in their movements, falling off their horses without a sign. Only then would one see fresh blood rapidly pooling below their bodies.

Sinclair passed through the battlefield, returning to her frontlines before she conveniently shoved the heart in her hand into the manticore's mouth before jumping on its head. She looked at the battlefield and let out a sharp whistle, pointing ahead to ten bearguard knights. The manticore immediately leapt forward.

They quickly crossed towards enemy ranks. Just ahead of the bearguard knights' charge, the paladins fell off their horses one after the other. The chaos in the right wing was slowly starting to bleed into the left.

"Damn it, we can't guard that any longer!" Salwyn smashed down on the guardrail of his carriage roof, turning his head abruptly as he shouted, "A squad of imperial knights, paladins, a hundred infantry, and a priest!"

Salwyn's voice suddenly became faltered after giving the orders. The neat square formation of the reserve troops behind him was now staggered apart. The soldiers corresponding to the orders stepped out immediately and charged into the battlefield to reinforce the defensive line, but that left only a few hundred soldiers behind. Of that, only twenty of them were knights. All the mages and priests were already on the battlefield.

The only ones capable of magic who weren't deployed apart from Salwyn himself were a level 15 great mage and a level 16 priest. The two were considered the cream of the crop in the Sequoia Kingdom, their status no lower than his own. They were truly distinguished figures that could not be placed in danger.

"Demon... She's a real demon! We need to annihilate her, regardless of the price!" The priest's grizzly beard was trembling, his old wrinkle-filled face distorted with rage. Words were not enough to express his anger, as he smashed his jade-embedded gold sceptre into the roof of the carriage.

'MY CARRIAGE!' Salwyn snarled inside his mind, but he didn't speak it out loud, 'Since you hate demons so much, then go kill her

already!’

However, he knew quite clearly that this priest in front of him wouldn’t dare go out onto the battlefield after seeing Sinclair take out his companion so easily. The most he could do was bless the reserve troops who were prepared to move out.

Neian’s influence in the Sequoia Kingdom was limited, with only three level 16 priests in total. One of them would be a cardinal in the future, and now that one of them had died unexpectedly in battle the possibility for the remaining ones to advance had increased from a third to a half. This was a huge increase, but if he died in battle as well the one priest who hadn’t come here would be guaranteed that spot.

The mathematics was simple, but human minds weren’t. Even while working for the honour of their god, worshippers were allowed to retain some amount of selfishness.

Book 2, Chapter 127

Unwilling Defeat(2)

“That girl is really only fifteen?” Salwyn asked the great mage next to him with a grave expression.

“My magic doesn’t lie, she is level 15 at most!” the great mage answered with an equally serious tone.

This great mage was still young, almost the same age as Salwyn himself. He seemed destined to become a powerhouse in the future. As such, Salwyn had great respect for him, also being certain that he wouldn’t go on the battlefield unless he gained full control of the situation. Such a young character with a promising future likely wouldn’t risk placing himself in danger.

Before the battle even began the mage had cast various buffs on the army, fulfilling his purpose in accompanying the troops. He had nothing left to do.

In his entire life, Salwyn had never lost absolute control of a battle. Single battles aside, even long campaigns were under his thumb from start to finish. Everything went exactly as he planned, and even if there were small hiccups along the way he had a habit of maintaining strong reserves to deal with them.

His reputation as a war artist wasn’t something he had engineered himself. It had come naturally through his various military victories, both large and small. The only reason Rislant outranked him in the Iron Triangle Empire was due to a difference in age and experience. At least, that was the way Salwyn and his subordinates saw it. It was only because of this reputation that Salwyn was selected as the commander of the alliance. If not for that, this post would customarily have been taken up by a powerful general of the Sequoia Kingdom.

Watching the battle from the sidelines, the nobles of the Sequoia

Kingdom hid far away from the frontlines. The high-ranking officers were secretly happy that command had not gone to them; Salwyn was the only one who could sustain such a difficult battle. They themselves would likely have lost their frontlines to that female demon's surprise attacks long ago.

However, the only thing Salwyn seemed to change was the length of the struggle. With his carriage acting as the core of the army, ahead of them was a muddled battlefield with thousands of people.

More than two thousand elite soldiers had started the battle, and hundreds more had been engaged as it went on. There were still a hundred or so elite soldiers around Salwyn, but they were the personal guard of the more than ten groups of nobles here. They couldn't be activated unless they were surrounded and in immediate danger. The same went for Salwyn's fifty imperial guards. They were the protectors of the royal household, and their chief duty was to protect the prince.

The allied forces were up against more than six thousand soldiers, but the opposing army was far inferior to theirs. There were all kinds of people amongst the troops, ranging from fierce robbers to ordinary men who just swung their weapons wildly. However, there was no place for weaklings in the Bloodstained Lands; even ordinary men were comparable to common soldiers of the human kingdoms. The slight difference between them and the elites they were facing was overcome by their strength in numbers, especially in a staggered melee like this one.

Professional soldiers took advantage of formations, discipline, and teamwork on the battlefield, amplifying their individual prowess. Their training allowed them to be twice as good as they were alone, also keeping their morale up. However, this battlefield was devoid of such superiority. The allied forces couldn't maintain their formation at all, every organisation attempt by Salwyn broken apart by the ferocious bearguard knights as they completely shattered all resistance.

Once the black-armoured knights managed to penetrate the toughest defences of their enemies, they would return to a square formation and await further orders. They used this time to get some rest; following them were ravenous slaves who would fight like wolves and tigers.

The two great mages of the Schumpeter Family didn't cast spells to assist the soldiers in their engagements; all their energy was used up in keeping the powerhouses of the opponents at bay. Four mages above level 10 had already fallen to their spells, alongside three level 12 priests. This alone showed the difference between Norland and Faelor; if two mages of similar level from Faelor were to take their place, there would be no crushing victories. They would have had to exert all their effort, only barely coming out victorious.

On top of all that, Sinclair's cunning was terrifying. She constantly had a dazed expression on her face, with nobody knowing when her hysteria would break out once more. The messy battlefield posed no distraction to her at all; she appeared and disappeared when and where she pleased. Her split-second teleport abilities allowed her to quietly appear behind her target, killing them with one swift blow.

Her hands, legs, knees, elbows... every part of her body was a deadly weapon, and most deadly of all was the two black daggers that she wielded with pinpoint accuracy. Faced against these blades, even an imperial knight's heavy armour seemed to be nothing but paper.

Sinclair didn't attack often, but every move affected the outcome of the battle. A level 16 priest, a level 14 great mage, a saint-level paladin had all died at her hands. In fact, the only injury she had sustained on the battlefield was when the paladin had returned a blow in his last moments. However, the attack had only made her spit out some blood that was a dirty black.

The manticore was quietly crouched down, its huge ten-metre

body an unspeakable deterrence on the battlefield. Its abilities hadn't been put on full display; it seemed like it was only responsible for Sinclair's safety when she was alone. A group of elite soldiers had rushed at it early on, but its sting had emitted a cloud of poisonous mist that killed them within thirty seconds. The manticore seemed to tire after the discharge, but a few hearts from Sinclair in quick succession revitalised it. After that display, nobody dared near a ten metre radius of it, not even the bearguard knights that were on the same side.

Salwyn had assumed that a battle against an unorganised mass would have been easy. Their disadvantage in numbers was merely superficial; having led Red Cossack before, he knew that his three thousand elites actually far surpassed the opposing army. And that was before the effect of battle on the mixed mob that had no training was considered.

However, the battle had not gone as planned. That demonic young lady used her keen sense of smell on the battlefield, removing his powerhouses one by one. The stable frontlines had been smashed to bits by the bearguard knights, turning the entire battlefield into a huge brawl.

And Sinclair had brought six thousand people with her! Given his understanding of the Bloodstained Lands, Salwyn feared every adult male had been herded to this battle. The hardest thing to comprehend was that the enemies were losing more men than he was, but that mix of soldiers that had been forced to battle showed no signs of wanting to retreat or escape.

When Sinclair disappeared and resurfaced among a group of imperial knights, Salwyn knew that the group was certainly done for. How many people had this demon killed? It seemed like she never tired, and never got hurt. It made him feel like every time she was tiring, she healed herself by eating the hearts of his strongest soldiers!

This was no misconception. Sinclair had a grade 4 rune on her

body, the Dark Sacrifice. This rune could absorb the enemy's vitality, boosting the user's stamina and endurance. It effectively made her invulnerable to normal damage. This was an extremely powerful rune that was comparable to some grade 5 runes, but it had one breakout flaw. Its power irked the Eternal Dragon, making it difficult for anyone using it to be granted an extension of their life. This meant that they had a hundred years fewer than others on their path to power.

Looking at Sinclair inflict wanton destruction on another group of paladins, Salwyn grabbed the great mage standing next to him with one swoop. His eyes were blazing red as he gave the man a death stare, roaring at the top of his voice, "Look at what's happening! You say she's only level 15? YOU STILL DARE SAY SHE'S ONLY LEVEL 15?!"

Book 2, Chapter 128

Unwilling Defeat(3)

“She’s level 15 at most.” The young great mage had extraordinary confidence and calm, coolly shoving Salwyn’s hand away as he spoke without holding back, “My magic does not lie. Someday in the future, Sir level 12 mage, you will believe this.”

The emphasis on his level caused Salwyn to feel miserable. As a level 15 great mage at about the same age, this fellow’s status was actually slightly higher than his own. As someone from the Sequoia Kingdom, he didn’t have to acknowledge a prince of the Iron Triangle Empire. If not for Salwyn’s own reputation as a war artist, the young great mage would long since have been offended by these words and grown hostile. The audience near the commander’s carriage looked united, but they were anything but. A fair number of people here could tell that the situation was not going well.

More than two thousand of the opponents had died on the opponents’ side, but they themselves had lost more than a thousand. This turned a 1:2 battle into almost 1:4. The frontlines could crumble at any point, while those hated black knights were assembling once more behind their opponents. It wasn’t just ten this time; all of them had converged. Sinclair evidently wanted to end her opponent in a decisive assault.

“Retreat!” Salwyn send out his last command, his mouth tasting bitter as he did. This failure would become the largest blemish of his military career, one that was difficult to clean off. He’d lost an entire legion of imperial knights and 500 elite infantry; it was a huge blow to the Empire’s strength. All of the paladins and battle priests being wiped out would also deal a great blow to their ally in the Sequoia Kingdom, the Church of Valour. The death of a level 16 priest, a saint paladin, and numerous mages was far beyond the loss of the knights.

What he found most difficult to accept was that the great mage was still insisting that demon was level 15, because ‘magic tells no lies.’ These words had come from a future grand mage, so he couldn’t even doubt them!

When the horse carriage started to pull back, Salwyn swept his eyes over the battlefield one last time. He suddenly had the urge to curse. That woman had dealt with a dozen heavy knights in that moment, she was a restless killing machine! She’d even taken out the powerful priest and sacred knight before this... if this was the battle power of someone who was merely level 15, he would gouge his own eyes out.

Salwyn really wanted to ask if this genius’ brain was filled with magic or dead yeast. Nobody below level 18 that he knew of could achieve such results on the battlefield. He was willing to swear on his royal ancestors that no matter what level the demonic girl was, her battle might definitely reached level 18.

With retreat being called, many of the nobles realised the situation was not ideal. They left immediately, their personal guard forming tens of streams that headed out in different directions. As for the soldiers still engaged in the brutal battle, they were ruthlessly abandoned.

This was a very common sight in war. More soldiers could be recruited if they died, and if that didn’t work one could employ mercenaries. However, once a lord was taken as a slave they would likely be beheaded. Even the best case scenario would be paying a huge ransom, so why not just use that money to employ new soldiers instead?

Sinclair suddenly shrieked in the distance, her voice so sharp it resonated through the sky. The giant manticore carried her into the sky, its tremendous body that was tens of metres long moving at a speed unbelievable for its size. It charged into the battlefield, pursuing Salwyn.

There was no lack of powerhouses amongst the retreating troops, so there was only a slight panic. Salwyn and the level 15 mage launched disjunction spells at the same time, two balls of dark green locking onto Sinclair and flying towards her like bolts of lightning.

However, the girl merely jumped and teleported over to the defensive line that blocked her way to the carriage, beginning a massacre. This time, her figure no longer flickered in and out of existence, instead becoming a black tornado that tore through the formation in a storm of blades that took four or five lives every time it spun.

However, the two balls of light changed direction in mid-air, still aimed at her. She raised her arms and grabbed two of the guards, tossing them towards the spells. One immediately turned green all over, crumbling apart in the blink of an eye.

The other was noticeably sturdier and with better reflexes. His energy poured forth to protect him, wearing the disjunction spell away. The green light that could take lives grew much milder, eventually fading away, but the soldier was seriously injured as well. He spat out blood and lost his consciousness. The two disjunction spells had affected Sinclair as well, causing a pale green to rise on her face, but she continued charging nevertheless.

The priest atop the roof of the carriage ended up activating an intricate and elaborate divine scroll. An enraged roar rang out as Neian's symbol appeared in the air, divine power surging around the giant symbol and forming a great destructive force. The priest guided this power, pushing it towards Sinclair.

This was a grade 7 spell: Word of God. It was normally used to affect an entire area, but the priest guided all of the damage towards Sinclair. She actually spat out a mouthful of black blood and fell backwards, crashing towards the ground.

The manticore roared out, tearing a few warriors who wanted to

take advantage of the situation apart. It protected her well until the girl managed to groan and grab its fur, climbing onto its back. She stared coldly at the priest atop the carriage, but didn't continue her attacks. The priest seemed terrified under her steely gaze; it was all he could do to stay upright and not move, but even so the hand on his sceptre trembled slightly.

Salwyn took a look around, seeing nearly a thousand elites escorting their masters as they fled in a hurry. He couldn't help but want to curse once more. Were these soldiers under his command, and if the two on the carriage could have attacked earlier instead of just standing there and criticising the situation, saying things like 'magic does not lie,' then the results of the battle might have been far different.

It was a pity that there was no place for ifs in the world.

The rest of the soldiers were still fighting to the death. Although they were already abandoned, their faith and honour still compelled them to battle until the end. They knew this girl was a representative of demons, killing her slaves as she wished. Even if they became her slaves, they would meet the same pitiful end. Besides, they were not the refugees of the Bloodstained Lands who had no future— they were soldiers with families and homes. Between a pathetic life and a glorious death, they chose the latter.

The valiant soldiers held the enemies back, allowing their lords the time to leave. However, they would not be remembered by anyone except their families.

Sinclair was stood quietly atop the head of the manticore. Just a moment ago she seemed as frail as a broken doll, but now she seemed to be much better as her aura strengthened without end.

Salwyn had gotten one thing right. Although Sinclair was merely a level 15 assassin, she was also a grade 3 rune knight with a grade 4 rune like Dark Sacrifice that allowed her to be far stronger than others. A total of three grade 3 runes in addition to that made her

comparable to a saint of Norland. And in Faelor, the standard of a saint dropped to level 16 from level 18. In addition to all that, the regenerative abilities of Dark Sacrifice amplified her might in large scale battlefields.

Just as Richard had concluded, the power of runes was a decisive difference between Norland and Faelor.

Book 2, Chapter 129

News

Sinclair was in a great mood after defeating their enemies, strolling through the corpse-filled battlefield on her manticore which was taking casual bites out of the bodies as it walked past. The creature was rather picky, only eating paladins and priest, completely interested in anyone who wasn't a cleric or was below level 10.

Wherever the manticore passed, everyone stopped looting and gave it wide berth. The beast wouldn't favour these people just because they had fought tirelessly for its master; clawing up everyone it bumped into and fiddling with them like they were toys. Given its poisonous claws, there were no chances of survival.

One of the mages approached the manticore's side, reporting the aftermath to Sinclair. 2800 enemy soldiers had been completely wiped out, with less than a hundred escapees. There were no captives this time; the troops who had grown dejected the moment Salwyn fled were immediately massacred by their men, while the rest had fought all the way to the end. After all, the men of the Bloodstained Lands were all bandits; they naturally wouldn't show mercy. Sinclair's own side had their losses as well, with 3500 dead while half of the rest were injured.

The girl waved her hands in annoyance, "I don't care about that trash, it doesn't matter if all of them die! How are my knights, that's the most important."

"Six dead and four seriously injured. Two of them can't be saved," the mage replied with respect.

"Meaning I'm only left with 31 men who can continue fighting?" Sinclair furrowed her brows.

"Yes, we've faced too many losses..." Sinclair waved him to a stop

before he finished.

She thought things over for a moment before sighing, “It looks like my game is at an end. I need to get more serious. Things come back to what we talked about before; whether there are real legendary beings on this plane. Anyone can call themselves a saint, but legendary? That’s a different matter altogether. Only those who reach level 21 can unlock a legendary ability.”

“Perhaps the so-called legendary beings of this plane don’t have any legendary abilities, just calling themselves by that name like those mock saints. They might just be level 17 or 18.,” the mage conjectured. This is what Sinclair had been thinking as well.

“No!” she eventually shook her head, her fingers subconsciously twirling the manticore’s fur, “I’ve already killed two of those mock saints, three if we count the one today. There’s also the two level 16 priests as well. We haven’t even been here that long, and this isn’t even a powerful region of the plane. How could there be so many level 16 individuals if the plane greatly restricts such power? Faelor feels vaguely similar to Norland, I already feel like I’m going to advance again.”

A look of surprise painted the mage’s face as he rejoiced, “That’s great!” If Sinclair managed to advance to level 16 at this age where strength was everything, it would greatly increase her standing and ability to win planar wars.

However, the girl herself wasn’t all that happy, “It’s nothing! The only thing it means is that the upper bound of this plane encompasses legendary might, and those rumours are all true! With how we massacred this army, we might end up facing a true elite of this plane. I may be a grade 3 rune knight, but that won’t mean anything in a fight against a legendary!”

“Perhaps we should start integrating into the plane,” the mage suggested after much thought, “At least we should branch out into the human kingdoms that aren’t theocracies.. After all, the gods of

this plane are our biggest enemies.”

Indeed, that was one of the ways to invade a plane. However, it was a move that reeked of desperation.

When one entered a new plane to explore it, there was a limit to the power of the people that could be teleported over. For example, a secondary plane limited at level 18 would only allow stable passage of those at level 15 or below. Any higher and the portal would grow unstable, giving rise to rifts in spacetime. However, the support of runes allowed the invading party to go head to head against the powerhouses of the new plane, or at least hold out against them for a while.

Most expeditions failed due to one of three reasons. First and foremost would be direct interference from the gods of said plane. Second was human wave tactics from the residents of the plane. Last and most unlucky of them all was entering a plane without the resources to build a portal back. Those parties ended up being trapped unto their deaths.

However, Sinclair had met none of those issues. Her problem was that they had come to an unknown plane, the standard of which appeared to be far higher than most other secondary planes. This posed a great disadvantage to her; her individual strength was rather poor for this expedition. It wouldn't be difficult to imagine the ending if she were targeted by one of the powerhouses here. Thus, the best plan now was to move discreetly, only expanding when she had enough power and influence.

Nonetheless, the mage wasn't able to understand how she felt. As a user of the Dark Sacrifice rune, she was extremely sensitive to the passage of time. The Eternal Dragon would never extend her life, making her unwilling to waste ten years of her existence on a plane like this. That was ten years of her precious youth!

But it didn't seem like there were any other choices now, causing her to be in a terrible mood. She laughed a sultry laugh, containing

the charm of an enchantress that could smite tons of men and women. The mage didn't feel too good at the sight; he knew this meant she was in a bad mood. He also knew better than to speak in a moment like that.

The other mage arrived just then. He hadn't been cleaning up the battlefield, nor was he pursuing their enemies, instead going around and interrogating a bunch of people. He rushed over to Sinclair and said in a hurry, "My Lady, there's news about Richard!"

"Richard? Which Richard?" She has been so relaxed and reckless this entire journey that she had almost forgotten the target of this expedition.

"Richard Archeron! I heard a handful of people talking about him just now. Damn their stupid language, it was so hard to decipher it. They talked about the magic equipment bought by some sword saint that greatly increased his power. Apparently it was a device that was fit onto their body. Mistress, they're talking about runes!"

The mage was particularly excited, "I asked around, and found out that Richard was at Bluewater Oasis for a while, having built quite a reputation for himself in the Bloodstained Lands. The information on him wasn't kept secret; the deal had been quite expensive and involved a lot of high-profile people. As long as we catch him, we can get the coordinates to go back!"

Sinclair shook her head, "It won't be that easy. If I'm not mistaken, Richard's team should have met with the same accident we did. Even if we catch him and find his base, we'd only find an extinguished Lighthouse of Time like the one at the Mensa base."

The second mage was shocked at Sinclair's words, speaking hesitantly, "So what do we—"

"A runemaster will still be valuable to us, even if his lighthouse has been extinguished! We find him, catch him, and kill everyone around. I want to make him my slave, one that will craft runes for

me his entire life! That way I'll have a never ending supply of rune knights. If he could make such notorious transactions with these locals, it seems like he's already integrated himself into this plane. That's exactly what we need at this moment, we can use his status to hide ourselves. We will begin our conquest only when the rune knights are ready!"

Book 2, Chapter 130

News(2)

Sinclair roughly grabbed at the manticore's mane as she spoke, causing the beast to shake its head as it breathed out black air, "Once this plane becomes mine, I'll definitely find a way to go back. At that point, I'd love to see the faces of those old rascals of the family. I'll strip a few of those old farts, hanging them up to have the orcs from here fuck them up the ass!"

The more she said, the more excited she grew. Her face turned a bewitching red. Sinclair never hid her resentment for her family, but even the two great mages were unsure as to the origin of this hatred.

Her eyes were glistening by the time she finished her last sentence. She licked her lips once done, continuing, "I heard that Richard is a handsome little rascal. When I catch him, I'd love to test him out a little. Maybe I'll even use him a couple times."

One of the mages cleared his throat and reminded her, "The point of Richard's existence is to help you build a team of rune knights, Mistress."

He had been by Sinclair's side for some now, having seen first hand the plights of many strong men who she 'used a couple times.' Richard was a runemaster and mage, he definitely wouldn't be tough enough to withstand her.

Sinclair nodded with a conflicting expression, "Then I'll use him sparingly."

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Richard's team was trailing the eastern border of the Bloodstained Lands. His expression was terse, clearly pondering over something throughout the horse ride. Smoke could be seen rising from afar, as a group of armoured troops were escorting a

middle-aged noble. They were heading in his direction, looking rather alarmed.

‘This is the fourth group...’ Richard thought silently. He pointed to the incoming riders, “Stop them for questioning.”

The noble ahead had already seen Richard from a distance, being scared soulless. However, his horsemanship was rather limited and it would be impossible for their team to outrun the desert warriors he saw. The only thing he could do was to follow Richard’s command.

He quickly recovered once he saw Richard’s mage robes and his crest of nobility, quickly greeting him, “I am Asadis, the Golden Maple Viscount. You are?”

Richard smiled in response, “Richard, a frontier knight of the Sequoia Kingdom.”

“Oh, a frontier knight...” there was a hint of arrogance on Asadis’ face, but he quickly reined himself in. He scanned through Richard’s fierce army, asking politely, “Who is your lord?”

“The Direwolf Duke, Bevry.”

Asadis straightened up upon hearing that name, but his face didn’t warp to one of disgust. Unlike the first three nobles Richard had stopped, he showed no resentment towards that name.

“Ah, someone who leaves a great impression on others, with true pioneering spirit. He’s quite suitable to be the lord of a frontier knight like you.”

This was an ingenious response, but his opinion of the Direwolf Duke was obvious with his words. Of the three dukes of the Sequoia Kingdom, Bevry was the one who loved war the most. He was always fighting somewhere; he directed most of his menace towards the enemies of the kingdom, but he still engaged with opponents within on occasion. That was the reason for his famous title.

The relationship between the three dukes of the Sequoia Kingdom was peculiarly balanced. The two remaining dukes had a lot of conflicting views, but to restrict Bevry's insatiable desire to expand they allied often and kept him in check. Thankfully, neither Bevry himself nor his generals were particularly outstanding generals. They mainly won battles through fierceness over strategy or tactics.

Many years of battle had drained a huge portion of Bevry's fortune. The Direwolf Duke had the largest territory in the kingdom, and a lot of it was fertile, but he didn't have nearly as much wealth as his peers.

The viscount's shrewdness was obvious at this point. He wasn't like the other nobles who had judged Richard for his status, only showing disdain thinking he was riding someone else's status. This fellow had some knowledge of military affairs, and he himself was level 8. He was well aware of the might of Richard's troops; they weren't inferior to his own army. In fact, he could probably defeat the standing armies of most of the kingdom's barons. Thus, he treated Richard like he would an equal.

At the same time, Richard was observing Asadis as well. He was familiar with this name, having come across it before. If he didn't remember wrongly, this viscount's lands were only about 200 kilometres away from his own village. A lot of the fertile land had been cultivated, and there were mountains with mysterious mines and forests that produced precious food.

The addition to the title made it evident that he was from a massive and rather renowned family. The Maple Marquess in the north of the kingdom was his father. Richard escorted Asadis for a part of the journey, chatting with the viscount along the way. He inquired about the details of the battle against the invaders.

Asadis provided a rather neutral and accurate account of the battle, matching with Richard's own expectations for the bearguard knights. He didn't exaggerate the fighting ability of the

two level 14 mages either; level 14 mages from Norland with some runes could easily go head to head with level 16 mages of this plane.

Richard himself didn't care about any mages of Faelor at a similar level. He was hovering on the edge of level 11, and at that point he would be confident in destroying a level 12 mage of Faelor in a magic duel.

Asadis also confirmed the appearance of a demonic young girl that the allied army was calling a nightmare, the cause of his sunken mood. Her bizarre way of killing, the massive manticore, and the overpowering battle strength allowed him to confirm her identity: Sinclair, of the Schumpeter Family.

Sisley and Sinclair; the reputation of the two Schumpeter girls exceeded even that of the family head. Their traits were well known, especially those of Sinclair. The girl had been participating in planar wars since she was 14, and it had already been more than ten years since then. If not for an underperformance in wars on Norland itself, she would be much more famous than Alice who had defeated Solam's alliance.

The arrogance of Norland was showcased in many different ways. For example, internal battles were much more important to those of Norland than planar wars, unless it was with another primary plane.

Combining the previous rumours and Sinclair's performance in this battle, Richard suspected that she was equivalent to someone at level 18. This was definitely an unwanted fight, the powerhouses on his side could barely hold her off. Sinclair could kill off anyone outside of Waterflower in the blink of an eye, taking it easy as she roamed around and took every chance to kill his subordinates. His entire party could end up killed at her hands as she nibbled away at his forces one by one.

Book 2, Chapter 131

A Necessary Enemy

Once they were done escorting Asadis, Richard parted with the viscount and continued advancing southeast.

“What do we do now?” Flowsand asked. She was always close to him, so she had heard everything.

Richard let out a long sigh, “We need to change our plans. If Sinclair is the leader of the enemy troops, we don’t have the capability to fight them off. She’s already close to Bluewater, so she’ll definitely learn of my existence. So... we have to take some risks!”

“What do you intend to do?” Flowsand asked.

Richard gently tapped the saddle, pondering for a while before he answered, “I want to meet our lord, the Direwolf Duke.”

At that moment, the sound of hurried horses started to make its way over to them. A group of twenty or so knights could be seen on the horizon.

They were undoubtedly the personal guard of a noble who had pulled back from the frontline. Regardless of age and level, all of them were good at riding and had sharp foresight, being able to escape the demonic clutches of Sinclair. Of course, from another point of view they could also be considered deserters who abandoned their comrades just before battle.

Richard had already gathered enough information, and had started initial talks with Asadis about a trade agreement. As such, he wasn’t interested in the latest developments on the frontline anymore. Since that was the case, he didn’t ask his subordinates to intercept.

However, the oncoming group made an abrupt turn and made a beeline towards them of their own volition. Without a need for his

instructions, his subordinates who had experienced innumerable bloody battles immediately assumed battle formation. The mages and cleric were protected in the centre, while the knights formed the wings in preparation for attack. Since Richard hadn't given an order to stop, they had done all this while on the move.

The opposing group had no more than twenty men, and there didn't seem to be anyone exceptional amongst them. One attack, and they would all be wiped out. Having fought Salwyn's troops who used pack tactics to assault them, Richard's own subordinates were unintimidated by the sudden attack of such a small group.

The knights who were in a perfectly straight formation only started to rein in their horses when they were a mere ten horses away. The stones kicked up by their mounts even managed to hit the barbarian warriors at the very front.

Richard frowned, waving his hand. The entire army came to a neat stop.

The barbarian warriors were now armed with axe and shield. The stronger warriors who were gifted at battle even had a weapon in each hand. They all stabilised themselves, getting in defensive position as they placed their shields on the ground. The rude provocation had angered many of them, but not one took a step forward. They had grown used to obeying Richard's orders— if Richard wasn't commanding them directly, they would only follow the wind wolves.

At that time, Richard's core party looked at each other before casting a look of disbelief at their opponents. Having met several forces in the Bloodstained Lands, both strong and weak, they had never come across someone with the nerve to provoke an army of hundreds with a mere twenty riders. With how close they were, a simple order for the barbarians to throw out their axes would completely decimate this group of morons.

At the centre of the formation was a young noble, his luxurious

clothes covering a fat body that was certainly more than a hundred kilograms. He himself didn't look beyond level 5, but his riding ability was beyond his weight and level. At the very least, he was fast enough to run for his life in the earlier battle. Naturally, that was also in part due to the breeding of the horse he rode. It was taller and stronger than the rest.

The youth raised his head and arrogantly looked at the opposing side, his gaze staying on Richard for a while. He had been most concerned about Richard's mage robes and noble crest, but he grew even more haughty after realising the crest was unfamiliar. He couldn't even be bothered to speak, merely waving his fat hand.

One knight immediately brought his horse forward at a gallop, covering the ten metres very quickly and almost hitting the barbarians at the front. A mere two metres away, the horse stood up and turned two rounds on the spot, before landing on its front legs.

The knight didn't have that much control. It was just that his steed was intimidated by the invisible killing intent of those opposite, not daring to move any closer. However, his expression was the same as that of his master. His nose was up in the air, and he seemed unable to notice the rage on the barbarians' faces.

"This is the great and mighty Highland Unicorn, Viscount Zim! Who the hell are you people?! Tell me now!" he roared.

Richard slowly raised his hand, stopping his subordinates from acting. The wind wolves crouching in their positions represented his intentions; as long as they didn't move, neither would the warriors.

"My name is Richard, Richard Archeron. I'm a frontier knight under the Direwolf Duke," Richard replied calmly.

Having heard of his rank, unbridled laughter broke out amongst some of Zim's knights. However, the viscount in question didn't pay attention to Richard at all, completely focused on Flowsand's

face. The cleric was eye-grabbing even in a crowd of hundreds. Even if one ignored her perfect complexion, her amber eyes and eyebrows lent a mysterious charm and aura to her face.

The knight at the front took out a lasso, spinning it a few times in the air before covering all the barbarians and desert warriors at the front. He didn't even let go of the trolls and half-orcs, or the defected soldiers who had been following Richard since early into his invasion.

“Frontier knight what's-his-name, consider yourself lucky. The noble Zim needs bodyguards, I declare that all these slaves have been confiscated by us. Take your personal guards and leave. Make it snappy! Don't force me to punish you further!” the knight ordered haughtily, as if he was a king.

He didn't even bother to remember Richard's name, showing a clear lack of manners. This fellow wouldn't even be classified as a noble, but he was already this arrogant. In fact, his arrogance surpassed that of his master.

“Wait!” Zim shouted, before gasping out some air. He pointed at Flowsand, “I want to buy that woman!”

The knight followed the viscount's finger to Flowsand, lust starting to radiate from his eyes. However, the fact that his back was turned to Zim ensured that his expression couldn't be seen.

The knight reached for the purse at his waist, fiddling around for a while. Giving it some thought, he didn't throw the entire purse and instead tossed a few gold coins out to Richard, “Here's ten coins! It's already too much to pay for a woman. You, follow me now!”

As he spoke, the knight urged his horse in Flowsand's direction. In his view, the slaves who were in the way would give way automatically. If they didn't, he would just get his horse to trample them to death. Even though barbarians were strong, they weren't strong enough to stand the trample of a horse. The death of lowly

slaves would be no big loss. He might even be able to seek compensation from the frontier knight, who wasn't of much higher rank than the slaves. He would just claim his horse's hooves were damaged.

However, the slaves had no intention of giving way, their shields firmly rooted to the ground. The horse was the one who gave way, refusing to move forward. The knight's face immediately burnt red with shame, and he growled with anger, "You damn slaves, move!"

Whoosh! he brandished his whip, lashing viciously at the barbarian at the front. The warrior didn't avoid the whip, merely raising his thick arm to block. A loud smack resounded in the area as the whip landed on his arm, coiling around it a few times. The tip left a scar on the unarmoured warrior.

Book 2, Chapter 132

A Necessary Enemy(2)

The ten gold coins flew towards Richard's location. If they continued along their path, one of the coins would hit him square in the face. Of course, that would never happen. All of the coins hit an invisible barrier, dropping to the ground. They jumped around on the ground, clinking against each other.

None of Richard's soldiers moved at the sight, not even glancing at the coins. Hundreds of gazes were focused on the knight at the front. The fellow's horse seemed more perceptive than him, refusing to go forward and even starting to retreat as it showed signs of irritation.

Richard stroked his chin lightly, slightly unused to the feeling. A short, grizzly beard had covered his face during the long hide and seek with Salwyn, so the newly shaven face felt off. Although he had the exquisite appearance that came from his elven blood, every bristle that grew on his face was as stiff as a needle.

As he looked at the astonished viscount, Richard slipped into thought. The knight turned red as he pulled hard on his whip, but the level 10 barbarian warrior stood still and unyielding. His arms seemed to be cast in metal; no matter how hard the knight tried, they wouldn't budge an inch. On the other hand, the warhorse's irritability was about to make him lose his balance, throwing him off. This absolutely couldn't happen! His hand fumbled around for the longsword at the side of the saddle.

The knight suddenly felt a strong gust of wind heading his way. Before he could turn his head to see what that was, a strong wind wolf suddenly pounced on him, pushing him off the horse and onto the ground. The warhorse was startled, bursting out into a long neigh as it raised its front hooves. Gangdor had already moved out of the crowd by this time, chopping diagonally with his gigantic

axe to cut the creature's chest and abdomen open.

The horse collapsed on its back, blood and internal organs gushing out of the tear. The ghastly sight intimidated Zim and his subordinates for a moment.

The knight who had been attacked let out a long, bloodcurdling screech as the wolf bit into his right soldier, ruthlessly tearing out a large chunk of his flesh. Thankfully he was still a level 8 warrior himself; even though he was covered in dirt as he tossed about, he could still counterattack. Yet, just as he waved his fist, a few barbarian soldiers had already thrown themselves forward and jumped on him, firmly pinning him to the ground.

"How should we deal with this, Master?" a tall and burly barbarian asked menacingly.

Richard glanced at Zim and his subordinates, "Anyone who draws their weapon gets their right arm chopped off. No exceptions."

Zim's knights had their hands on their sword hilts, but Richard's words caused them to grow stiff.

It was only Zim that began to shriek, "What did you say? SAY IT AGAIN!"

Richard didn't have the habit of repeating orders. His soldiers were quick and thorough with their execution, not needing him to say them twice. Even as Zim was shrieking, one of the barbarians forced the leading knight's arm open, while another raised his axe and chopped it off cleanly. The arm was separated from his body instantly.

Zim's entire body was shaking as he pointed at Richard, "You... you..." However, he was already unable to recall Richard's name. A chaotic mix of excessive anger, humiliation, and fear that he would never admit had stopped him from getting a proper sentence out for the longest time.

Richard ignored the slob as he said to Gangdor, “Next time, just hack the rider and not the horse. Mounts are expensive, humans aren’t.”

Gangdor nodded vigorously as he answered loudly, “I know, boss! People like this in particular are about as valuable as dogs!”

Richard nodded his head in praise, “You’ve grown smarter!”

“It’s because I levelled up, boss!” Gangdor said proudly.

It was only then that Richard raised his head, glancing at Zim as he spoke indifferently, “Who are you to dare come and take my slaves?”

Zim’s face turned so red that it seemed like blood would leak out of it at any time. His voice was so high-pitched that he was basically squeaking, “I’m the noble Highland Unicorn, Viscount Zim! The title is from...”

Richard didn’t bother waiting for the man to finish his sentence, repeating his own, “Who are you to dare come and take my slaves?”

“I am the noble...” Midway through the shriek, Zim finally realised the meaning of Richard’s words. His already-red face started turning purple. He yelled hysterically, “How dare you humiliate me?! A lowly frontier knight actually dares to humiliate a viscount with royal blood?>! Someone, kill him for me! Wait no, I want to keep him alive and torture him. Just cut off his limbs! Kill anyone who dares to resist!”

The viscount’s screams reverberated throughout the empty plains. His knights had already drawn their swords, but they were hesitant in their movements. Richard had only brought a few hundred people, while they had less than twenty.

Most of these soldiers weren’t as undiscerning as their master. They naturally realised the extreme disparity between the two armies, both in terms of quantity and calibre of troops. If they

really charged ahead, Richard could kill all of them in a few minutes as long as he ordered his troops to retaliate. Zim's status wasn't high enough for a frontier knight to just resign himself to death. This was easy enough to realise from how the leading knight had his arm chopped off, that fool now rolling and screaming on the ground.

“WHAT ARE YOU LOT DOING? KILL EVERYONE BUT THE WOMEN!” Zim raged, waving his whip and lashing at his guards.

The knights thus roared loudly, getting into formation as they tried to charge forth. However, their horses refused to move faster than a trot. Sadly, the frontier knight in front of them disappointed them again. Richard didn't retreat as they hoped, giving them a way out of the embarrassing position. This frontier knight didn't need any of that, and it seemed like he didn't intend to let Viscount Zim off so easily either.

In fact, Richard just repeated his earlier command, “Anyone who draws their weapon gets their right arm chopped off. No exceptions.” His subordinated faithfully executed the orders at once .

All of Zim's guards were brilliant soldiers for their level. They were unwilling to resign themselves to having their arms chopped off, but they were eventually surrounded by the barbarian soldiers and pressured until they collapsed. By the time the fifth person collapsed, they finally gave up on resistance. A few who were still dawdling and hadn't drawn their weapons yet could only thank their luck.

Zim was scared silly, using a trembling finger to point at Richard. His mouth opened and closed, but no words came out at all. Two barbarian warriors pulled him off his horse, dragging him in front of Richard.

Richard didn't get off his horse, looking down on the fat viscount condescendingly as he asked, “I'm really curious. This is the

Bloodstained Lands, why did you have the audacity to get close to an army ten times your size, even demanding my slaves and woman? How has a fool like you lived so long?”

Book 2, Chapter 133

A Necessary Enemy(3)

Zim's expression warped between shock, humiliation, and insanity, but the terror Richard had expected did not show itself. "I'm the Highland Unicorn—"

He couldn't help but interrupt the deranged viscount, "I know. You're the son of Earl Yatu, and your mother is the king's cousin. Those of royal blood in the Sequoia Kingdom typically have Highland at the start of their titles. Unicorn is a good follow-up, but is that it?"

Zim was stunned, speaking with disbelief, "You know all that but you still dare teach me with such disrespect? Let me go immediately! Once I'm back in my lands I'll bring my army and get revenge! When the time comes I'll kill your entire family, and torture you, and..."

"And take my woman," Richard kindly reminded him.

"Yes, yes, your woman! That little girl isn't half bad, I never saw such pretty eyes before! Once I drain all your blood, I'll entertain her properly! First will be me, then my beloved dog, then my loyal guards..."

Watching as Zim sent spit flying everywhere, Richard frowned slightly and asked, "Aren't you afraid I'll kill you here?"

"You're just a frontier knight..." Zim suddenly went silent, regaining his senses as his face filled with panic. Beads of cold sweat surged from his forehead. He wasn't completely stupid, and now he realised that his opponents were so strong none of his men could flee. If this frontier knight in front of him ordered everyone killed and his own body thrown into the wilderness, nobody would learn what had occurred in this desolate land.

Richard chuckled and jumped off his horse, "So you aren't that

dumb. Let's make sure you remember this better, I think you need some more entertainment. You lot, strip the honourable Viscount. Olar, flog the lord ten times. Remember to use his own whip, ours aren't as high-quality!"

The barbarians stripped the viscount quickly; Zim squealed like a pig being slaughtered, but soon he was completely bare. The obese youth's skin was fair and tender, an almost blinding white.

Given how vile and ruthless Olar was, the elven bard took the whip and spared no strength as he lashed out at the viscount's buttocks. The whip's end left a deep, bloody imprint on Zim's inner thigh, pushing his screams an octave higher.

Richard raised a hand, stopping the elf's second whip as he pointed between Zim's legs. "Olar. Take care not to ruin that part of our beloved viscount. They're extremely tender! If I'm not wrong, most of his value is in that place."

The elven bard didn't quite understand the underlying meaning behind the words, but he still understood the direct order. His wrists twisted once more, the whip landing on Zim's fair, tender buttocks and his lower back. He left a few more bloody imprints on the inner thighs, but this time he took care to avoid the sensitive areas. The viscount's pitch raised with every whip; it seemed like there was endless energy in that fat body supporting his squeals.

The ten whips were finally finished with great difficulty, but the fellow was still howling. The marks from the lashes were slowly puffing up, the process slow and painful. It wasn't much better than the actually flogging.

Richard finally walked over to Zim and lifted the man's chin, their faces no more than ten centimetres apart. The viscount's eyes were blazing with flames that were a contradiction of fury and fear.

He smiled tenderly, patting the man's face, "My name is Richard, Richard Archeron. Don't forget it this time. Once you get back,

gather your army as soon as possible for your revenge.

“Also, I’m a frontier knight, not a normal one. Know the difference between the two, so you won’t make such a foolish mistake in the future.” Having said this, Richard stood up and brought out a handkerchief, wiping the hand that had patted the slob’s face. This act upset the so-called Highland Unicorn no less than the ten whips. The fury was so intense in that chubby face that it looked like he would suffocate.

The naked noble was then tossed to the ground. The guards whose limbs were fine immediately helped him up, removing their own clothes for him to change into. Those whose arms were chopped off had already bound their injuries, withstanding the pain with great difficulty as they headed towards the viscount. Nobody cared for the corpses of their dead companions; they would end up feeding the beasts of the land.

Watching Zim’s figure recede into the distance, Richard shook his head and pointed at the guards whose limbs were fine, “If I were them, I’d definitely find a way to escape right now.”

“What will happen after they return?” Flowsand asked.

“They’re doomed to die. Those that lost their arms won’t be spared either.”

“Why did you treat that moron so well?” she continued with a frown. From her point of view, there were many methods to take care of such arrogant fellows and teach them a lesson. The best would be to kill him and have the wind wolves eat his body. That way, there would be no traces at all. Richard’s method seemed to be the most violent, but there were also issues that would crop up in the future.

“We need enemies now, and Zim is the best kind to have,” Richard smiled in answer.

“Also...” he paused, “He dared think of taking you. I’ll leave a

shadow in him for the rest of his life!”

.....

With the episode concluded, the troops continued to advance. Dawn the next day, they had reached Richard’s first true territory on this plane, a little village called Bran with about a hundred families.

Bran was at the foot of a mountain, with a little brook passing through the village. It was less than ten kilometres away from the path between the Sequoia Kingdom and the Bloodstained lands. The Land of Turmoil in the southeast had forests, swamps, and a steep mountain range. That was where the broodmother was wandering around, clearing out all the powerful beings it could find.

Richard didn’t stay at the village for a long time. He just met the village head and some elders, learning a little about the population and the environment before he left for the Land of Turmoil.

At the foot of the mountain, tens of wind wolves walked out single file, escorting two of his that had bundles tied around them back. Some stayed by Richard’s side, giving him twenty in total. This was the maximum number that he could simultaneously control.

Having sent the four orcish idols he’d obtained from the Bloodstained Lands to the broodmother, Richard led the group forward to Baron Fontaine’s territory. A messenger had already sent word that he hoped to meet the Direwolf Duke. And back at the forest within the Land of Turmoil, the broodmother heeded Richard’s command and turned back, heading towards the borders of the Bloodstained Lands.

Now, everything was put in play. All that was left was the meeting with Duke Bevry. The results of that meeting would determine Richard’s next bait. While he himself felt like the bait he’d thrown out was ample and would pander to the tastes of the

duke, he couldn't be a hundred percent sure of the results.

Book 2, Chapter 134

Crisis

The third night after leaving Bran, Richard's army finally reached Baron Fontaine's castle, meeting the person the Direwolf Duke had appointed to be his supplier.

The castle was built on a small island in the middle of Lake Windermere, connected to the shore by a short path. This wasn't a natural landform, built by the baron's family generation over generation. The manpower and financial resources invested into this task was immeasurable, and yet it had taken an entire century's worth of construction to reach its current grandeur.

The outer ring of the castle had classical architecture, full of solid cylindrical spires with battlements and a watch tower on each roof. As for the buildings within, they could be considered works of art. Roofs of all shapes were around, with pillars that linked two or three storeys together and wide terraces that were exquisite and beautiful. One could admire the scenery of the lake as well as the mountains and forests nearby from the main building.

This castle had an ancient name that translated into Twilight on the Lake. Over time, it had been shortened to Twilight Castle.

Seeing the castle, Richard's first instinct was to think of how he would siege it. Even with his amateurish perspective, he could find three or four effective routes of attack. That alone showed how weak its defences were. Even the strongest defence was the less than twenty metres of narrow road from the lake shore to the castle gates. Even if it limited the number of attackers, however, eighty heavily armed knights could charge through it at a time. It was only later, when he discovered the charm and beauty of the castle, that he realised it was never meant to be a fort.

Before this visit, Richard had already heard that Baron Fontaine was an outstanding swordsman. He had inherited his family's

sword arts and was currently level 14, fully deserving of his title as master swordsman. He was also an artist and poet, adoring the two far more than he did battle.

Unlike the other subordinates of Duke Bevry, Fontaine was someone with an extraordinarily mild temperament, rarely growing his army. He had 800 soldiers under his command, of which about a hundred were elite knights.

The Baron's military looked weak, but those who underestimated him had all suffered bitter consequences. Fontaine was talented in many aspects, including his strategic and tactical prowess in war. He had defeated several of his family's enemies one after the other, expanding their lands to over five hundred square kilometres. This already surpassed the limits of an average viscount.

The land was fertile, producing food in abundance. At the same time, coal, iron, and copper were plentiful as well. Although these weren't specifically valuable ores, they were still the most common metals used to build arms on Faelor.

Richard stationed most of his troops at the camp outside Fontaine's castle, taking ten or so of his subordinates to enter and meet him. The baron was about forty years of age, in the prime of his life. He was genuinely taken aback by Richard's youth when they met, and during the banquet after was thoroughly impressed by his profound knowledge of magic. He himself had three sons and seven daughters, some of whom were quite interested in the field. He had them come out, allowing Richard to get to know them and assess their potential.

Richard thus cast a few detection spells when they were having tea, discovering that the children were all rather gifted enough that reaching level 10 wouldn't be a problem. He thus congratulated Fontaine, and he was immediately able to tell how overjoyed the man was.

By the time Fontaine was done arranging for accommodations for

Richard and his subordinates, the sky had already grown dark. Richard chatted with him as they sipped on their tea, finding out a lot more about the history and secrets of the Sequoia Kingdom.

The reason for the mild-mannered Fontaine being subordinate to someone like the Direwolf Duke stretched back to three generations prior. The Baron's ancestor had sworn generational loyalty to the Duke's, and that pact had stood tall for over seventy years already.

Internal affairs in the Sequoia Kingdom were extremely complicated. The royal family was the ruler of the entire kingdom in name, but it had limited influence over the military and political affairs of the various nobles within it. If one thought about it, it was only inevitable for a kingdom that granted so much autonomy to its fief lords to enter a state of disorder.

Besides, the various churches were an issue as well. Three deities had official churches in the Sequoia Kingdom, supported by powerful nobles. There were even more trying hard to wriggle their way in as well. However, these churches were completely antagonised by a group of nobles worshipping their ancestors, led by the Direwolf Duke. If the churches spread their influence, their ancestors' spirits would not be nourished by faith anymore and would gradually wither and fade. This would be a decimating blow to such families. Someone like Duke Bevry who had reached level 16 owed at least a part of his power to his formidable ancestors.

On the other hand, if their ancestors' spirits gained enough power of faith, they could ignite their godfire and transcend to godhood. On the other hand, certain sacrifices could connect these spirits to their descendants, allowing them to bestow some of their power and thus greatly increase the descendant's chances of advancing to the saint or even legendary realm.

Thus, there was an absolute conflict of interest between ancestral worship and the pantheon. The battle between the two sides was incomparably intense, with no methods too low to be used. The

only time the two groups joined hands was when invaders from another plane threatened the entire plane's safety. However, when the matter was resolved their death feud would resume. Even alliances were formed they were quite unstable, as evidenced by the crushing defeat of the combined forces of the Iron Triangle Empire and the Sequoia Kingdom.

When Richard had first received Marvin's letter, he had already understood how important the rune had to be for the Direwolf Duke to take him under his wing. Now that he had enough information, he understood the sheer intensity of Bevry's thirst for power. Although the Duke knew his identity and origin were problematic, and the history had been fabricated by Marvin right under his nose, he would still protect Richard as long as he could obtain the strength-boosting rune. This was extremely favourable in Richard's opinion— a bond based off mutual benefit or collaboration was much stronger than any oath or treaty.

Baron Fontaine was a charming man who spoke with grace, broadening Richard's horizons after a night of chatting. Richard left a good impression as well, especially with his calm and collected presence. This was something reserved for the cream of the nobles of this plane.

It was getting late into the night, so Richard headed back to his room to rest. The baron's envoy would set off the next morning, heading to Duke Bevry's capital and informing him of Richard's intentions. After that, they would simply wait for a reply.

Book 2, Chapter 135

Crisis(2)

Baron Fontaine also informed Richard that the Duke had dispatched a team of elite knights led by a saint, and they were currently en route to the castle. Their main task was to escort the rune in his hands back, but he could also follow them on their return journey; they would be able to ensure his safety. Richard's hands. Even though they weren't at war, the conflict between churches and ancestor worshippers ensured that armed battles could break out at any time.

The guest room prepared by the Baron was grand and spacious, offering scenic views of the lake right outside the ceiling-to-floor windows. It wasn't far away from his subordinates as well, showing the thought and consideration that went into his accommodations.

However, as Richard lay on the bed, he kept tossing and turning while unable to fall asleep. An uneasy feeling in his heart kept him wide awake.

'What is it? Does Fontaine have any plans to kill me?' he furrowed his brows, deep in thought. Nestled somewhere within that deep feeling of unease was a fear for his very life, as if a sharp blade was about to fall from the sky at any time. However, the passion and sincerity of the Baron had been heartfelt, that was something Richard was sure of. No additional defences had been placed in the castle, and when he toured it he hadn't once felt the presence of any additional weapons.

This likely wasn't just the natural paranoia from being in unfamiliar territory. Although Baron Fontaine had some degree of strength, it wasn't enough to alarm him. Both Zendrall and himself could summon a steady stream of magic creatures, while Waterflower's fighting abilities far surpassed her level. He also had

Flowsand, who had the Book of Time. With the upgrade to the bonuses from her title, she could use far more scrolls at one go than before. As long as she didn't run out, she would be an untiring machine.

Where was this danger coming from?

Richard sat up, wearing his clothes and removing the nameless longsword from its scabbard and placing it within arm's reach. He mentally gave commands to those contracted to him to remain alert and on guard, at the same time making contact with the broodmother and having her proceed towards the baron's lands and wait at the fringe of the mountain areas for further orders.

However, at a speed of a mere ten kilometres an hour, it would be impossible for the broodmother to reach the battlefield in time to offer assistance. It had to be informed in advance, so that it could wait in ambush at a specified place or clear an escape route. If the situation was so bad that the broodmother had to break out of a siege, it could knock any chasing soldiers out.

The premonition of danger was growing stronger and stronger. It was mere intuition, but for mages like Richard intuition normally hinted at such a thing. There was a reason he felt this sense of danger, only that he couldn't figure out why exactly that was.

Gangdor, Waterflower, and the others got up one by one as per his command, outfitting themselves for battle. Waterflower quietly made her way to Flowsand's room and informed the cleric to prepare, remaining there to protect her.

At the campgrounds outside of the castle, the two trolls got up and woke the remaining soldiers rather violently, trying as much as possible not to alert the defenders of the castle. The soldiers were ordered to get ready for battle.

This was the first night where Richard had come into contact with the Direwolf Duke's strength. With Baron Fontaine's attitude and intentions not clear at the time, all of his soldiers had slept in

full armour, ready to emerge from their tents and fight the moment they picked up their weapons.

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Earlier that evening. The sun seemed reluctant to set, painting half the sky crimson. A young hunter walked briskly towards Bran, a plentiful harvest of prey on his back.

The mountains and forests here weren't completely peaceful and safe. There were recent sightings of gigantic wolves that had never been seen before. Experienced hunters loathed coming across bears and wolves, and this youth was no exception. He was hoping to make it back to the village before the sky turned dark; it would be too dangerous in the forest before nightfall.

As the village slowly came into view, the hunter couldn't help but pick up his steps. However, just as he was doing so an unfathomably beautiful lady that he could never even have dreamt of appeared in front of him. Gazing at her almost nude body, the youth almost went cross-eyed.

"Is the leader of this village named Richard?" the beautiful lady tenderly asked.

"Richard? No.. Oh wait, yes! Our new leader... He's named Richard Arc—" the youth's train of thought slowed down, his gaze refusing to leave the lady's chest. Thankfully he wasn't smitten to the point that he couldn't answer questions.

"It better be him! Come here, my baby, help me find out where that little Richard went," the beauty said as she turned to the side.

A huge lion head popped out all of a sudden at her words, almost the size of the hunter's full upper body. The manticore opened its mouth wide open, biting off the youth's head, shoulders, and chest with one bite. Shortly after, two rays of light shot out of its eyes and projected an image in the air. A young man on a horse was patrolling Bran, and although it was rather blurry one could make

out his features.

Sinclair naturally recognised him at a glance. Before she left home, she'd memorised this face. However, the Richard in the young hunter's memory was clearly much more and composed than the one in Norland, seeming more deep and profound.

"Oh! The beautiful young boy grew even more handsome! We have to use him well!" Sinclair said, almost moaning.

The light coming from the manticore's eyes slowly dimmed, as the image retrieved from the hunter's soul started to disappear. A mere two minutes of projection was enough to drain its energy, leaving it dispirited and listless. However, Sinclair was now brimming with excitement. She grabbed the creature's mane and pulled hard, murmuring in its ear, "You'll definitely sniff Richard out, won't you?"

The manticore let out a deep howl, showing its acknowledgement. It then gazed towards Bran that wasn't far off, roaring twice in succession.

Sinclair patted the creature with force, "You can have as many of the people in the village as you want!"

Half an hour later, she left Bran atop the manticore's back, the surviving bearguard knights and two great mages following behind her. They headed north, rushing along Richard's trail as they charged towards Twilight Castle.

The small village was left in complete silence, all lights extinguished. Black mist lingered in every corner, as viscous liquid continually streamed out of the half-closed doors. This liquid wasn't the dark red of blood, instead a pitch black.

Although souls weren't exclusively in the domain of the gods, even touching the field of soul-reading was an extremely trying task with a huge price to pay. Despite its size and power, the manticore had exhausted all its strength to extract the hunter's

memories from his soul, making it extremely hungry. However, the entirety of Bran added up could only fill it up halfway. The manticore thrived not on flesh and blood, but on life force and soul essence. There weren't any strong individuals in Bran, so they didn't suit its taste.

In the dark of the night, the demons who spread fear and death scurried along. Based on their speed, they would reach Baron Fontaine's castle before the crack of dawn.

Book 2, Chapter 136

Untitled

All of a sudden, Sinclair gasped in surprise and reined in the manticore, looking at the woods by the road. A humongous wolf was pacing back and forth there, its eyes vigilantly fixated on this group of soldiers of strange shapes and sizes. She felt extremely uneasy, as though she was being watched.

She instantly leapt off the manticore, wrapping herself up with her cloak as usual before vanishing into the night. The huge wolf was evidently startled, displaying a degree of intelligence that wasn't typical of most beasts. It retreated cautiously, only managing to take two steps before Sinclair silently appeared behind it. She sent her two blades into the creature's neck, sending it to the ground with a thud...

The light from one of the wind wolves was extinguished in Richard's mind, causing him to stand abruptly and hurtle towards the window, drawing the curtains open in a flurry. It was a tranquil night, a gentle breeze blowing as moonlight shone upon the lake. Everything seemed serene and beautiful, without any indications of an impending fight...

Having sliced the wolf's head off, Sinclair returned to the manticore. The creature sniffed the air and continued on its way, no slower than the flight of a magic bird. It was like a black current surging towards Twilight Castle.

They didn't move far before Sinclair reined it in once more. She pointed at a bush not too far away, with another huge wolf crouched as it calmly observed the group. This wolf looked exactly like the one earlier. Seeing the group stop in their tracks, it immediately turned and ran off, but a bearguard knight had already flung out his axe. The axe spun through the air with a terrifying whistle, hitting the creature's waist in a split second

before slicing it apart.

The knight then had his mount move over to the wolf's corpse to retrieve his axe, also picking up the body as per Sinclair's orders to bring it to the manticore.

"These wolves are rather odd. Come, my darling, devour it and let's see what it knows."

The manticore let out a deep howl in response to the command, reluctant to get to work. Soul reading was an exhausting affair, and it had only ate half its fill earlier. If it had to examine another soul, its stomach would be rumbling with hunger again.

However, Sinclair would not tolerate such lazy behaviour. She shoved the creature's head down, pinching it vigorously. The manticore let out a begrudging roar, lowering its head as it slowly gnawed on the wolf's carcass. It was extremely unwilling.

Although the wind wolf was much bigger than other similar creatures, it was extremely small when compared to the manticore. Sinclair's contract beast gobbled it down completely, laying on the ground unable to move. It only managed to get back on its feet after a full ten minutes, shaking its head forcefully as it let loose a listless howl.

"It doesn't have a soul?!" Sinclair was taken aback. Without a soul, the manticore naturally wouldn't be able to scout out any memories. However, every wild animal should have a soul. Even contract beasts were no exception; the only animal without a soul was those summoned with magic that were made of pure energy. However, such creatures wouldn't leave behind a corpse either.

One reason why the manticore couldn't find anything from the wind wolf was the possibility that it didn't have sufficient ability to examine the creature's soul. However, that was extremely unlikely. Even in Norland it was a rare and formidable creature, with soul reading being its innate ability.

Despite this small episode, Sinclair wouldn't delay their journey just because of a wolf without a soul. Faelor was a new, foreign plane; anything could happen here. A huge soulless wolf was nothing in the grand scheme of things...

As the second wind wolf was chopped in half, another beacon of light dimmed and vanished in Richard's mind. But this time, it had transmitted a clear image of Sinclair and the bearguard knights to Richard through the broodmother.

"The Schumpeters!" Richard instantly identified the group in the image. He opened up his map, examining it under the moonlight. If one connected the locations of the deaths of the two wind wolves, the path clearly led towards Twilight Castle.

He gave it some thought before ringing the bell in the room. A gentle sound resonated in the distance through a tube, and not long later a maid knocked on his door. "May I know what you need, Sir Richard?"

Richard opened the door and went straight to the point. "I want to see Baron Fontaine immediately! Tell him it's very important!"

"But... Baron Fontaine is likely asleep at the moment. Would it be possible to call on him tomorrow morning?" the maid replied awkwardly. She was sleepy as well; it was currently one in the night.

"It's very important!" Richard emphasized. Although the maid was extremely tired, she wasn't foolish. She immediately went to call the butler. Regardless of the reasonability of the request, it wasn't something she could decide on herself. She didn't have such authority.

The baron's family had a long history, making it comparable to some of the more wealthy and influential families of the empire. This also meant there would be relatively stringent regulations. Richard wasn't going to wait for the maid to pass the message through the hierarchy, giving Gangdor a command through his

mind that caused the brute to radiate an intense killing intent. The sheer aggression bubbled up like a current, engulfing half the building like a violent tide!

Baron Fontaine was a level 14 swordsman, making him extremely sensitive to murderous intent. This would surely be more effective at waking him up than anything else.

As expected, it took only five minutes before the casually dressed baron appeared before Richard with his sword. Seeing the mage and his entourage already armed to the teeth on the other side of the corridor, he immediately narrowed his eyes. “An enemy attack?” he asked with a sharp gaze.

Richard nodded, “A fierce battle between the alliance and the demonic invaders occurred not long ago at the Bloodstained Lands. I assume you heard of it, my Lord?”

Fontaine replied with a nod. This battle was the most significant event in the Sequoia Kingdom this year. The allied armies had suffered a crushing defeat, with nearly half of them completely annihilated. Neian’s church lost more than half its power in the kingdom, while two other nobles were greatly humiliated. This event would be followed by a period of political unrest.

Richard said solemnly, “One of my subordinates just passed information to me in secret that Sinclair, the leader of the demons, is rushing towards Twilight Castle at full speed. She’s brought along her heavily armed knights and the two mages, already having passed Bran. We have little valuable time to prepare our defences!”

This was a shocking piece of news; Fontaine almost couldn’t believe his ears. “She’s launching an attack on the Sequoia Kingdom!”

“She wishes to attack the entire plane,” Richard replied.

“But... Alright, I’ll prepare everything I have right away!” Having

said that, the Baron turned to the butler who had just arrived in a hurry, “Call the captain on duty. There might be an enemy attack tonight!”

As the butler dashed off in panic, Baron Fontaine turned to Richard and spread out his arms helplessly as he asked, “Thank you for the prompt warning, my friend. Now...”

“My men and I will certainly stay behind to help you resist these demons!” Richard replied.

Book 2, Chapter 137

An Attack In The Night

Baron Fontaine experienced a fleeting ominous feeling. As one of the Direwolf Duke's most trusted aides, he knew how much of a mystery Richard's past was, and that he was linked in some way to the myriad planes. However, the Duke had still elected to work with the mage, so he would also treat him as an ally.

Fontaine didn't suspect that Richard's unusual behaviour was directed at himself, even at the start. There wouldn't have been any need to wake him up if that was the case; Richard could have taken action right away. When he first welcomed Richard to his castle, he naturally had some defences in place as well. However, their interactions made him admire this young mage that was brimming with talent and elegance. Without any inside information, one wouldn't be able to tell that he was a foreigner, being convinced by his act as a descendant of some ancient family.

However, the news that Richard had disclosed astonished the Baron greatly. News of Sinclair's deeds had already spread across the human kingdoms like wildfire. Although the rumours had grown more and more exaggerated as they moved around, those who heard them agreed that it would be impossible to collaborate or even compromise with this demonic young lady. She was a complete lunatic, a perverted homicidal maniac.

The few minutes they spent waiting for the chief of guard seemed to take forever. "Perhaps... Should we leave?" Fontaine attempted to suggest.

"No, it's too late," Richard shook his head solemnly, "We won't be able to outrun her and her knights. And once we leave the castle, we won't even have any defences. It would only quicken our deaths."

Baron Fontaine was a decisive person as well. Hearing this

advice, he immediately decided to hole up and strengthen his defences, waiting for assistance.

Richard had already expressed his willingness to stay, and the mage and his group would be of great assistance. He himself was a level 10 mage, and his followers were no weaker. With such a powerful army agreeing to assist his defense, his confidence undoubtedly grew.

However, that growth was worth very little. The baron doubted his ability to defend against Sinclair, someone who had actually wiped out the allied armies of the Church of Valour, the Sequoia Kingdom, and the Iron Triangle Empire. His only hope was to defend the castle to his death, awaiting the Duke's assistance. However, this glimmer of hope was also dim; the Duke's army would take a minimum of three days to reach this place.

The captain quickly arrived, and Fontaine gave out a string of commands. He had someone go notify the army outside the castle to prepare for combat, before having some light cavalry dispatched every ten minutes to scout the direction Richard had pointed them in. Four fast horses and two messengers were prepared, ready to set out at any moment to request the Duke's aid.

He then had Richard summarised the numbers, capabilities, and military structure of the troops Richard had brought, allocating them different posts to defend. Everything was in order. Finally, the baron sent people to inform his wife and children to get up and prepare to leave. However, he wasn't so anxious as to sound the alarm that would mobilize everyone. Instead, he waited for news from the soldiers who were out scouting.

Once the initial shock had passed, the Baron had regained his composure. Although he completely believed Richard, he wasn't about to cause a pandemonium in the castle based on a scant few words. Richard wasn't worried either, keeping the man company in the study as they drank tea and awaited news.

At the same time, the broodmother transmitted a violent wave of energy to him. She was no longer a fuzzy glimmer of light in his mind, the divine power from the four idols that she had absorbed turning her into a twinkling star. She had managed to level up at this critical moment, completely digesting all the power she obtained and arriving at level 3.

Richard quickly inspected her new abilities, skipping past the options to add new drones and using all the energy to boost her speed. She could now fly short distances through the air, allowing her to cover twenty kilometres an hour, double her previous speed.

As per her previous orders, the broodmother was already hurrying towards Twilight Castle at full speed under the darkness of the night. Twilight Castle was fifty-odd kilometres away from the mountain ranges she was in before, so she would be able to get here fast enough to have a chance of entering the battlefield. Richard changed his orders with a thought, having her pass through the baron's lands right after reaching the border of the mountain range, heading straight for the castle.

Within the woods on the mountain, more than a dozen wind wolves were gathered to protect two abnormally large eggs. Even though the broodmother had levelled up, she still wasn't exceptionally fast. She thus decided to lay her eggs where she was, leaving wind wolves to protect them.

Half an hour later, the two eggs started to crack apart. Soon after, two enormous wind wolves crawled out, twice as big as their kin. They finished eating their shells, before shaking themselves dry and howling into the sky.

These wolves' eyes glowed with intelligence and wit, completely different from the ordinary drone. They communicated with each other for a moment, splitting the wind wolves into two packs. With each leading one of the packs, they sped through the forests and rushed towards Twilight Castle at top speed.

In Twilight Castle, Baron Fontaine was already done arranging appropriate defences. The moment the alarm sounded, all personnel would instantly take their positions. He glanced at the clock atop the fireplace once more, his expression growing more gloomy. It had been an entire hour since the first batch of light cavalry had been dispatched, and not a single one had reported back.

He stood up and grabbed his sword, saying to the chief of guard, "Toll the bell!"

At the same moment, the messengers who were awaiting commands at the stable left stealthily through a sewer behind the lake. They crossed Lake Windermere under the mask of the night, reaching the shore across the baron's territory. After passing through the forest, they would rush towards Duke Bevry's lands to seek help.

Richard nodded inwardly as he secretly studied how Baron Fontaine made arrangements. The silence of the night was quickly broken by the low yet resounding alarm, the entire castle instantly awakened from sleep. Troops of soldiers marched out of the barracks, entering the castle in an unending stream. Their roles had already been assigned, and they immediately headed for their posts to stand guard.

On the highest towers of the castle, the soldiers lifted the tarp off the ballistae, twirling the capstans with force. Bolts as big as javelins were inserted into the machine one by one. Each one was enchanted; outside of sheer power, they could automatically lock onto targets and chase them down. These things could fire as far as a kilometre away.

Twilight Castle was originally a vacation home, its construction based on aesthetics and the view. Although the outermost structures could be used as a barrier in battle, there were inevitably some imperfections all over to accommodate the overall beauty of the castle. Its defences were thus quite weak, making

these ballistae quite important.

Baron Fontaine had reinforced some of the parts when he acquired the castle, but even he had made sure not to affect its appearance. He had also paid a huge sum to acquire these enchanted ballista bolts. Anyone under the level of a saint would be heavily injured if they were shot.

Book 2, Chapter 138

An Attack In The Night(2)

Fontaine already had his ancestral magic armour on, his favourite sword polished and ready. He moved to the castle's main gates and instructed sternly, "Lights!"

The guards immediately spread the orders, and braziers all over the castle were lit up simultaneously to illuminate their surroundings. A flock of ravens swept out from several towers, either resting on the roofs or circling the night sky. They had bloodshot eyes and small bodies, gifted with the ability to see invisible objects. These mid-rank magical beasts were called scarlet-eyed ravens, and with them around it was practically impossible to launch a surprise attack on Twilight Castle.

Baron Fontaine was sat peacefully atop the highest tower, not anxious in the slightest. His castle was already prepared for battle. Generally speaking, these soldiers would be alert for a day at most, while their peak strength would only last a few hours. As Richard saw it, however, this was exactly why Baron Fontaine was so clever. If Sinclair saw the tight security and decided to delay her attack, the elite party dispatched by the duke would make it here. The leader of the party was a saint powerhouse who would greatly strengthen the castle's defences.

As long as the castle didn't fall to enemy hands, Fontaine's troops wouldn't suffer much damage. He could subdue the enemy troops without going to war, and it would be best if Sinclair retreated voluntarily. As for what would happen afterwards, well... The duke, the various churches, and the powerhouses of the kingdom would grab this woman who was so bold as to invade the Sequoia Kingdom by the neck.

On the other hand, Richard wasn't as confident. The Baron didn't understand either Norland or Sinclair, and his own

judgement told him that this battle was inevitable. However, a large group of wind wolves and the broodmother were already en route. The two packs, headed by the two elites, had already overtaken the broodmother and were only five kilometres away. He grew safer with every passing minute.

They were now in the dead of the night. Thick mist from the lake's surface had enveloped all of Twilight Castle, gradually spreading out. Even inside the castle one could only see the blurry silhouettes of the structures nearby in the light.

Fontaine maintained his upright posture, still at peace. Although he was gradually growing uneasy, his expression showed no signs of panic. After all, he was a powerful level 14 individual and within Twilight Castle where his ancestors' souls resided his senses were exceptionally sharp.

The moment he felt extremely disturbed, he knew that Sinclair had finally arrived. "She's here."

Richard was about to stand up, but upon realising that the Baron still wasn't moving he sat back down. Fontaine rested his sword on his lap, speaking calmly, "Richard, do you think she'll dare to attack my castle?"

Richard flashed a helpless smile. Giving it much thought, he eventually decided to speak the truth, "Judging by how arrogant she was when she defeated the alliance, I think she won't even bother to rest before starting the siege."

Fontaine didn't speak a word in response, but his grip on the hilt of his sword quietly tightened.

Hundreds of metres away from the castle, there were some sudden movements in the dense mist. The manticore silently emerged from within, Sinclair rested lazily on its back.

Behind the manticore, the magical horses stepped out one by one. The earth trembled lightly with their every step, and yet they

didn't make a single sound. These mounts had the ability to conceal every sound they made, allowing them to travel in absolute silence.

Even though they were separated by hundreds of metres and shrouded in dense fog, Sinclair had no problem looking across the distance. She squinted her eyes, fixing her gaze silently atop Twilight Castle.

One of the great mages furrowed his brows, "How are they this alert? It would have taken more than an hour to mobilise the guards and have them take position. Could they have other enemies?"

"No, they're waiting for me. I already see Richard." Sinclair glanced at the two great mages by her side and continued, "It seems like those two weird wolves or the light cavalry had some way of transmitting information through magic."

"No matter, won't we understand it all once we catch Richard?" one of them responded. In his eyes, these local armies were absolutely pathetic, not matching up to them at all. He definitely wouldn't have a problem dealing with a few mages of the same rank as him. As for Richard, even if he came from Norland he was still young, and wouldn't be beyond level 10.

"Well said!" Sinclair straightened herself and gently caressed her alluring lips with her fingers. "Then, charge!"

The exceptionally burly captain of the bearguard knights slowly urged his steed forward, gradually speeding up until they reached peak charge towards the main gates. The soldiers atop the walls had already discovered the knights the moment they emerged, pulling their longbows back to send a dozen arrows whizzing through the sky. The arrows that rained down were shockingly accurate, nearly none off course. It was clear the Baron had spent quite the effort on training them.

Seeing the shower of arrows targeted at him and his mount, the

captain didn't even bother to hide as he instead laughed sarcastically. Most of the arrows bounced off the strong armour, and those that did make it through caused nearly no damage. Both the captain and his mount felt absolutely nothing.

He quickly made it close to the city wall, bellowing loudly at thirty metres away as he tossed the axe in his hand. The battleaxe spun rapidly in the air, producing a sharp whistle that would send chills down one's spine as it headed right towards the top of the castle.

Baron Fontaine immediately turned pale at this attack. Even he wouldn't dare to resist the power of this axe!

The moment the battleaxe had left the bearguard chief's hand, Richard had already leapt out of his seat. His subordinates had also dodged it sooner than expected. Richard knew how powerful magic equipment was, and was also clear of the bearguard captain's actual strength. He wasn't willing to suffer the full impact of this powerful level 16 individual.

Fontaine had immediately made the best judgement as well. He roared for everyone to get down, being the first to lay low.

Seeing his actions, most of the other guards who originally wanted to stop the axe got down as well. A few of them hesitated, worrying about hurting their dignity or their lord's, instead attempting to resist it using their weapon. However, the blade of this single-edged axe was already as wide as a table, much bigger than the largest two-handed axes of the guards. In the face of such horrifying power, none of their weapons were effective at slowing it down.

Countless snaps rang out before the axe whirled back to the captain's hands at the foot of the castle. The soldiers who were still standing swayed a little. Their weapons split in two, followed by their bodies. In fact their torsos exploded, sending their top halves hurtling into the distance.

Book 2, Chapter 139

An Attack In The Night(3)

Once the enormous axe was gone, Fontaine instantly jumped back up. His face was pale, but his eyes seemed to be shooting flames as he glowered at the bearguard captain at the castle's foot. He quickly raised his right hand, sticking out three fingers. This was a command to fire the enchanted ballistae.

Seeing the signal, Richard urgently spoke up, "Three isn't enough, we need all of them!"

The Baron hesitated for a moment, but quickly clenched his hand into a fist. The surroundings were filled the sharp whistle of arrows once more as four enchanted bolts followed close behind the three that had already been fired. They all adjusted their trajectories after drawing an arc in the air, collectively heading towards the bearguard captain.

The enchanted ballista bolts travelled at high speed. The first three had practically reached the bearguard captain at the same time as his axe. The chief stretched out and retrieved his axe effortlessly, calmly using it to block the bolts whizzing towards him.

"DODGE IT!" Sinclair suddenly screeched from behind him, but he had no intention of retreating in a fight with these inferior locals even if he had heavy defences. He brandished his axe as he roared like thunder, striking the bolts one by one with astonishing skill and speed. The massive impact of the magical bolts caused him to sway, his mount pushed back step by step.

The remaining four bolts were already quite close. He would be able to jump off in time, but his mount would definitely be shot head on. Based off the heavy hits he had just suffered, even a magical steed with reinforced armour would be pierced through by these bolts. Sadly, he didn't have much time to think of a way to

counter them. He raised his axe without much thought, fending them off at the speed of lightning. Cutting one of them apart, he used the momentum to slice horizontally across another arrow that was heading straight for his steed.

Right at that moment, he suddenly felt a light grey flimmer of magical light flash over him, causing the axe in his hands to grow heavier in an instant. He was slowed down greatly, and even his control of his weapon suffered. The axe cut the bolt in two with difficulty, but it couldn't even slow it down, forget sending it to the ground. The projectile that was supposed to pierce through the mount now brushed past its abdomen, leaving a deep wound in its underside that revealed its organs.

The magical mount let out a sorrowful cry, abruptly leaping upwards and dismounting its rider. Losing control of his horse, it grew extremely difficult for the captain to block the two remaining bolts. He finally realised why his axe had grown so difficult to control—he himself had been crippled.

The bearguard chief had a fleeting thought: was that a weakening spell earlier? His axe finally flew out of his grasp under the impact, one of the arrows shooting through the side of his rib while another pierced through his steed.

He let out an indignant roar, eventually losing his footing and collapsing onto the ground. The wound at his side was big as a basin, the bolt pierced deep into his body and peeking out from the other side. The strong enchantments on the weapon had completely shattered his vulnerable organs.

The captain couldn't get up. He had been cursing his opponents' luck from the moment he was shot all the way until he was dismounted. All bearguard knights had decent resistance to magic, and grade 4 spells like the weakening spell earlier were quite unlikely to affect him. He himself was level 14, and with his runes and mount he was comparable to a level 16 individual. However, the weakening spell had still taken effect.

Outside of the two great mages on his side, the only others who could achieve this were those powerful mages from Norland who had a deep understanding of magic. One had to know to supplement a resistance-piercing component into the spell to make it work, but the primitive mages of Faelor hadn't reached that level yet. Most of them could only foolishly cast their spells, with a mere handful even thinking to boost the effects. Of course, those that thought of it wouldn't necessarily be able to actually do it.

Right before his death, a stroke of lightning flashed in the bearguard captain's consciousness. Richard! He was a mage from Norland!

As he watched the bearguard captain collapse with a loud thud, something snapped in Fontaine's mind. The tension completely dissipated, his thoughts enlivened once more. In that split second, he'd been astounded by the formidable strength that erupted from the bearguard captain. That burly demon clearly emitted the aura of someone at level 13 or 14, but he had the strength of a saint! He wasn't even the leader of this army, what terrifying powers did Sinclair possess?

If he hadn't decided to comply with Richard's advice and fire all the bolts in one go, coupled with that timely weakening spell, this dreadful enemy might already have made it to the main gate. Just looking at his powers, that knight was someone who could siege entire towns. And the arrogance in his arrival suggested he intended to do just that. One could only wonder how many hits from him the refined iron gates could withstand.

If that gigantic axe came flying once more... Fontaine shuddered at that realisation. His morale rose as he lifted his sword up high, commanding the soldiers to reload the ballistae. He pointed the sword at Sinclair who was atop the manticore, about to issue an order to fire.

"Wait!" Richard, who had been observing the battlefield, stopped the Baron. "Shoot the great mages! Focus on one of them!" he said

quickly.

The Baron agreed without further thought, shifting his sword to one of the great mages standing behind the troop as he yelled loudly, “Concentrate fire!”

Sinclair had been stuck staring at the corpse of the bearguard captain. The moment the Baron gave his command, her face contracted sinisterly. She suddenly pointed towards Twilight Castle, shrieking hysterically, “KILL THEM! KILL THEM ALL!”

The manticore growled and got up abruptly, racing towards the castle with Sinclair on its back. Dozens of magical mounts were urged forth, following closely behind their leader as the bearguard knights charged forth.

The two great mages had already buffed the knights with every spell they had, falling back for now. Sinclair and her knights could cover the distance in the blink of an eye, and they could almost see themselves ripping the hateful enemies into pieces. The looming walls and sturdy gate wouldn’t pose an obstacle to them.

However, the castle shone with magical light once more as the seven ballistae produced vibrations that could cause one’s heart to drum with fear. Enchanted ballista bolts shot out like lightning one by one.

The bearguard knights clearly had great battle techniques. The moment the bolts were launched, they immediately retreated. However, the enchanted bolts flew over their heads in no time, landing right behind them and piercing one of the great mages who had just finished his spells and was about to prepare for the next round.

Book 2, Chapter 140

A Bloody Battle

Sinclair's face changed immediately. Jumping off the manticore's back, she tried to intercept one of the huge ballista bolts. The sheer force of the impact left her pale, pushing her back a few metres to land on the ground. The six others effortlessly shot towards the great mage who was completely shocked.

Her small face contorted even more fiercely. She bit her lip so hard it seemed like blood would spurt out, flinging her head vigorously and shooting a venomous glance at Twilight Castle. Anyone on the walls that met her gaze was left trembling uncontrollably.

The demonic young lady hopped onto her beast, pulling hard at its mane. With a roar of pain, it leapt at least ten metres into the sky and made its way towards Twilight Castle at the speed of lightning. She didn't look back; that great mage's fate had already been decided.

The six remaining bolts seemed to arrive at the same time. A magical radiance illuminated the great mage's surroundings; he had already spent the mere three seconds he had to cover himself with three different protection spells. However, these spells wouldn't be enough to handle the magical bolts that had even killed the bearguard captain.

All of his defences crumbled under the magical light, the mage's body ripped apart by the explosive energy. All that was left of him after the attack was half a skull that flew far away. The other mage had retreated swiftly in his shock, hurriedly casting another spell on his companion once he determined he wasn't the target, but it was all for nothing. With his colleague dead, he was left without the time to care for the rest of the knights who had advanced; all he could think of was getting far away to avoid the attack of the

ballistae.

The combined might of the seven heavy bolts was comparable to an all-out attack from a saint. Even if he cast his defensive spells and used magic scrolls, there would be no escape. These heavy hits had given him a new perspective of the might of this plane; he no longer thought lowly of its inhabitants.

Richard stood behind the city walls, his gaze fixed on the battlefield. Endless amounts of information bounced around his head in a frenzy, too much to handle for even his superior intellect.

Most of his previous battles had been with far larger armies, but the information he had to process throughout hadn't reached a tenth of what he needed to now. Be it Sinclair or her subordinates, any one of them could seriously threaten his life in a one-on-one situation. As such, he needed to keep track of the current bearing and situation of every one of them. He spent ten times as much effort on a single bearguard knight as he would with a normal soldier, while Sinclair alone was tens of times more. Everything movement of hers, big or small, was kept track of in his mind.

This was the first time Richard had felt like he didn't have as much control of the battlefield as he wished.

His entire body was trembling, hot as lava in one moment and cold as ice in the other. Sinclair's face was magnified in a corner of his subconscious, every detail of her expression being tracked. Outside of that, the killing aura of every single bearguard knight relentlessly assaulted his morale.

Amidst all the killing, he had to use all of his willpower to stop himself from sounding a retreat. However, the trembling in his legs was hard to control. This was an innate problem of extremely intelligent beings— their instincts were normally hard to control. With no way of resisting the oncoming enemies, his mind was screaming for him to flee.

However, it was this battle between instinct and wisdom that had grown his will from day to day. Richard's legs were still trembling under his robes, but that trembling would slowly come to a stop. Time itself seemed to come to a standstill, every leap and landing of Sinclair and her knights growing clear in his mind.

In that split second, Richard had managed to process an absurd amount of information. He could figure out the path of every knight, and the flight pattern of the manticore upon which Sinclair was sat. Everything was extremely clear.

This was a sudden and esoteric sensation, as though the whole world was in his hands. Even he himself didn't understand how he managed to get to this level, but the sensation only lasted for a fleeting moment. He immediately felt drained of all his strength, as though a significant portion of his mana had vanished into thin air.

Sinclair slowly became that rapidly flashing demon once more, drifting through the sky before she covered herself with her cloak and disappeared into thin air.

When she vanished, that vile shadow was only about ten metres from the castle walls. Everyone on top suddenly felt great danger, as though they would be her next target. The subconsciously assumed battle stances, and even the archers slowed down their attacks on the bearguard knights.

"Baron Fontaine! Look out!" Richard suddenly screamed.

Fontaine was startled, suddenly feeling a light breeze brush past his face. He reacted instantly, bursting forth with all his power. He relied on his experience to determine the direction of his strike, thrusting his sword out to directly stab into the hollow space in front of him.

The shining blade was covered with his energy, growing fast and agile. A low whistle sounded as the blade cut through the air, proving its incomparable sharpness. This single strike was enough

to show his skill; even without the aid of runes, he would be a formidable presence back in Norland.

A soft clang sounded as two blades appeared out of thin air, Sinclair's figure revealing itself as she shot an astonished glance at the Baron. She never would have expected the trash nobles of this plane to use such an exquisite strike. The attack had been swift and precise, breaking her own aggression perfectly.

Fontaine's blow had locked up a cubic metre of space exactly where she would appear. If not for a timely counter, it would have pierced straight into her chest! Her body was extremely delicate; if her chest was cut open, she would be severely injured. Without a healer's help, it would take a long time for her to recover.

Ever since she reached Faelor, this was the first time someone below the level of a saint had forced her to materialise. Of course, this was also the first time she had launched a frontal assault.

Book 2, Chapter 141

A Bloody Battle(2)

Sinclair's blades entangled Fontaine's sword, twisting it away to one side before she used the dagger in her left hand to attempt a stab at his throat. However, Fontaine's aura suddenly rose in power; although it wasn't ferocious, this aura was one of resilience. A few shakes of the wrist allowed the man to slip free of the entanglement, thrusting his weapon towards her almost-bare chest.

Sinclair slightly frowned; the pressure she felt on her hands was a clear indicator of her opponent's strength. She began moving to the side without a trace, as long as she could build some distance she would be able to disappear immediately and launch a deadly blow from an inconceivable angle.

However, the Baron's swordplay and power were unexpected. He stuck close to her like a shadow, not giving her the room to use her ability. The pair battled back and forth, the sword and daggers clashing countless times. Even though Fontaine was at a disadvantage, he still managed to reserve the strength to strike back, his sword skills on full display. For a short period of time, Sinclair was actually trapped by him.

Not far away, Richard was silently watching the battle from the side. He'd already taken command of the defense, and was continually casting spells that allowed the Baron to maintain his agility. He had also directed the two level 8 mages under the Baron to curse Sinclair as best they could. Even though they were weak, dispelling spells weren't affected by the target's resistance. The three mages had together managed to scatter Sinclair's defense.

In a mere minute, Richard had already given out seven orders. The guards on the walls had been set in motion, the originally tidy formations growing fuzzy. However, these commands weren't

from the dark; his contracted party and the wind wolves were charging back and forth, congregating the soldiers at their positions.

By this point, the bearguard knights were already within ten metres of the castle, while the manticore paced back and forth nearby as it looked for the perfect time to strike. Twilight Castle's walls weren't very high, and it could definitely get up there with a single leap. Even the clumsy and heavy bearguard knights would be able to make it if they found a foothold to boost themselves off at the midpoint.

Once the situation started developing as per his plans outside of some confusion that he had accounted for, Richard suddenly had the illusion that everything in the world was under control. He was towering above the entire battlefield, looking down on everyone.

The shock of the attack by Sinclair's army, the bearguard knights, and the great mage who had just managed to escape the range of the ballistae was slowly starting to fade away. The chaos on the walls was nothing but a facade; in a mere minute, all his warriors would reach their stations. Those knights who managed to scale the walls would end up facing tremendous pressure, being injured all over as the resistance they faced would only grow fiercer.

A majority of people would not notice the difference on the battlefield. However, Richard knew that the key to victory lay in bleeding out his enemy bit by bit.

Sinclair had felt the shift in momentum as well. Fontaine's ruthless attacks left her unable to clearly judge the battlefield like Richard could, but her keen intuition from years of battle allowed her to sense an aura of danger. With a quick glance at her surroundings, she knew that a few people were rushing over in an obvious attempt to surround her.

She couldn't help but laugh coldly at the thought. How could any ordinary person try to interfere in this fight? Even the level 14 baron was nothing but trash in her eyes, leave alone those losers who were merely level 11 or 12. The only question was whether it was worth it risking small wounds to rid herself of these irritating insects, or whether she would wait for the opposition to show signs of weakness or make mistakes.

Richard... That was her true target on this expedition.

The opportunity came soon enough. A sudden, forceful swing of her daggers forced Baron to retreat, and she took the opportunity to attack. The surrounding warriors who hadn't found the opportunity to attack found their chests and throats gushing with blood. They wobbled, but they did not fall.

At that moment, the assassin strode forward with her charming eyes locked onto Richard. The longer dagger in her right hand was held in reverse grip, her hand raised as she stabbed down. There was nothing nearby, but this was Sinclair's greatest advantage in battle: unpredictable movements and mysterious strikes.

Her peripheral vision started to blur, as a line between her and Richard had already been formed in her mind. Anyone who tried to block her would either be dodged instantly or killed. Whatever the case was, by the time the blade in her right hand fell, it would definitely hit Richard in the throat.

In Sinclair's eyes, any mage was an easy target. If she made it close, even a great mage wouldn't be able to escape their fate. At worst, they would be able to survive a few more slashes. The daggers in her hands had the ability to repel magic, they were godlike weapons even in Norland.

Her right foot toed the ground, her entire body shaking with rage. Just as she was about to explode with rage, however, Richard suddenly screamed manically, "FLOWSAND!"

The scream was far too fast and eager. Richard's face was already

distorted in Sinclair's field of view, but even so she was slightly startled. Flowsand? This was a familiar name, but she couldn't remember at all where she had heard it before. She only paused for a moment, before continuing to run in his direction.

All of a sudden, she started to realise that her surroundings had changed. She felt like she was inside water, Richard's contorted face extending all around her. It was like waves were pushing her back, and everyone else had suddenly sped up. Sounds grew sharp and fragmented, as though two pieces of rusted iron were rubbed together. There was no way she could decipher the contents, but she was almost certain her enemies were cheering!

In the next moment, she finally understood. She indeed had heard human voices, it was just that they were so much faster that they seemed piercing to the ear.

She continued with her strike, her feet shooting off the ground uniformly as she charged. Her ability distorted the light in her vicinity, and the explosive burst of speed would give others the illusion that she had teleported. However, with everyone else moving so much faster now, she had instead become the slowest in the bunch.

Something must have happened! An unprecedented fear started to rise in Sinclair's heart, but her actions and thoughts were still sluggish. Even now, she couldn't comprehend the situation. The only thing that gave her comfort was the confused gazes of many soldiers as they swept through the area trying to find her. At least she was now in her half-invisible state.

At that moment, she started to feel a pain all over her body. She looked down, aghast to find that golden flames had covered her entire person. This was a pure, divine fire, something only priests and great mages could dispel. The fact that they would cause constant harm was secondary; Sinclair's greatest fear was that the flames surrounding her would cause her invisibility to fade away. There was another major problem—the power that propelled

these flames was the divine might of the Eternal Dragon!

Book 2, Chapter 142

Life and Death As One

How did the Eternal Dragon's powers appear on this plane? Sinclair had already checked before, confirming that the only gods on this plane were locals. There were no legends or myths related to the Eternal Dragon at all. All kinds of thoughts flashed past her head at once, especially that extinguished Lighthouse of Time. Could it be that this plane was already conquered by some major influence from Norland, and she had been led into a trap?

Just as fear and hesitation flooded her mind, she suddenly felt burning pain at her heart, the middle of her back, and the side of her waist; this was a premonition of fatal strikes being launched at her. The sense of danger at her heart was the greatest; that was a blow that could determine her life and death!

She suddenly started to shriek, every strand of her long hair standing erect as the size of her heart almost doubled. A loud explosion sounded out as the energy erupting within her smashed apart the invisible divine power shrouding her body, allowing her thoughts and movements to return to normal speed.

It was too late. She saw a sharp glint heading her way, the tip of Baron Fontaine's sword. The radiance at the sword's edge was completely different from the flickering light before, appearing reserved yet dignified with nearly twice the might. This was clearly a secret sword art! If this sword pierced her heart, the formidable energy behind it would immediately crush it to pieces. Even Dark Sacrifice wouldn't be able to save her from an irrevocable death. The heart was her greatest weakness!

An enchanted axe was aimed at the small of her back, while another longsword was cutting its way towards her ribs. The burly man who was using the axe burst forth with great might, the power behind his blow extremely astonishing. However, even that

didn't demand her attention. On the other hand, the young lady with the sword was only level 11. That sheer disparity in level meant she had no need to pay heed to that attack at all.

She knew she could cut the girl's head off with a flip of her hand, but the young lady looked unruly and attractive. She possessed this indescribable sense of wild beauty around her, especially when she moved at high speeds. Despite enormous experience with both sexes, Sinclair's interest was aroused; she had no intention to murder this beauty at all.

It was in that critical instant that her movements abruptly stiffened. A slowing spell from Richard and a curse from Zendrall had landed on her at almost the exact same time.

"RICHARD!" Sinclair shrieked with venom. The small delay bought enough time for Fontaine's sword to arrive, and she was forced to defend herself. Her daggers cast blurry shadows everywhere— while one blocked the sword, another flipped over to aim for the Baron's chest.

A look of unyielding determination flashed over Fontaine's face, as the sharp sword jolted and flung the short dagger off. It continued on its path towards her heart, the flaming energy on its surface growing more and more concentrated. At the same time, he struggled to twist his body in a bid to protect his own.

The sharp sword and long dagger hit their opponents at almost the exact same time. With weakening spells holding her back, Sinclair couldn't care less about the attacks from behind. She moved her body as well, struggling to use the armour on her left breast to block the edge of the sharp sword.

A loud clang sounded as the breastplate broke into pieces, leaving a bloody slash on the snowy white of her breast. The left of her bosom was exposed, making for an appalling sight. The fair and smooth appearance of Sinclair's perfect breasts only stopped at the exposed flesh— the part covered by armour was actually a refined

gold plate covered in radiant blood-red runes.

This was her grade 4 rune, Dark Sacrifice!

Having sent the armour flying, Fontaine's sword slipped into Sinclair's shoulder and almost penetrated it. Although such an injury would only be a flesh wound normally, a blow with his full strength was not so easy to withstand. Sinclair herself didn't excel at defense, shattering sounds coming from the rune on her chest as cracks appeared one after the other on its surface. The entire thing was almost completely destroyed!

"AHHH!" an extremely agonizing wail sounded out. A flip of her wrist cut Fontaine's ribs apart, leaving a gaping wound in his chest while his left arm was chopped off completely.

At the same time, Gangdor's axe and Waterflower's blade landed on Sinclair. Although there was no wind, the cloak on Sinclair's back suddenly rose to reveal a pair of golden, demonic wings extending out the back of her armour. The wings spread themselves out eerily, fending off Gangdor's full blow.

All the muscles on Gangdor's body were bulging, Gaia's Force and the rune combining to amplify his strength greatly. A tremendous force that could cut gold and crush boulders landed on Sinclair, blowing the cloak to pieces. The gigantic axe cut open the black armour on her back, leaving a bone-deep wound before it was flung off by her energy.

The Shepherd of Eternal Rest pierced right through Sinclair's side. A trace dark aura flitted across the edge of the sword before it plunged into Sinclair's body. The dark radiance gleaming faintly on Waterflower's body came from her rune set, allowing her to meld into the darkness. It caused her opponents to subconsciously neglect her presence.

It was still in the dead of the night, the sky its darkest shade of black. The full power of the Shepherd of Eternal Rest were unleashed, its powers boosted multifold by the black tint that had

appeared on the edge. That was the shade of the Breath of Darkness.

This was the ability of the combined set, making for the most powerful blow Waterflower could deal. A sinister, icy feeling instantly flooded Sinclair's mind; she had never come this close to death. It was almost as if the reaper had stuck out his icy, wet tongue, gently licking her earlobe. She shrieked hysterically, sending Fontaine flying with a kick that parted his sword from his hands. Beads of blood that were black as ink stained the edge of the sword.

Sinclair brandished her daggers behind her, causing Gangdor and Waterflower to dodge by reflex. She took this chance to charge wildly towards Richard.

Although every person who had set off on the expedition had been ready to face death at any moment, Sinclair had never imagined that the moment would come so soon. The serious damage inflicted on her rune was far more critical than the severe injuries elsewhere on her body, especially on a foreign plane where she could not find her way back.

At that moment, she had only one notion in her mind. Even if she was to die, she would drag Richard down with her! Everyone else here was useless trash with no power; only Richard could match her status, being worthy of her dying on.

All of a sudden, three majestic and powerful figures appeared between Sinclair and Richard. These were three of the Archeron knights. They couldn't see Sinclair's movements at all, but the trail indicated she wanted to harm Richard. The sheer difference in ability disallowed them from contending against this demonic young girl, so the only choice they had was to use their own bodies as a barrier to stop her.

Sinclair couldn't even bother telling them to get lost. She didn't take a glance at the weapons they wielded, nor did she try to dodge

their blows. She used her sheer speed to shove the blades and their owners away, her daggers flying at unbelievable speeds. She would cut them up into tens of equal pieces that would fly away upon impact.

Book 2, Chapter 143

Life and Death As One(2)

Gangdor chased behind Sinclair, but speed wasn't his forte. Waterflower quickly overtook him, her runes activating and boosting her speed leaving her only a hair's breadth away from Sinclair.

The three knights were sent flying away, cut into pieces right in front of Richard. His eyes quickly turned bloodshot, his entire body trembling with intense fear and wrath. However, he stayed calm and accurate as he took out the Book of Holding. A rich power of death spread through the area, and a tall and strong warrior of darkness added to Sinclair's obstacles.

A loud bang sounded as Sinclair pushed into the warrior, but she couldn't send the creature who weighed hundreds of kilograms flying away. She ended up thrusting her left dagger into the gap in armour at the warrior's neck, twisting his head off and rendering him completely useless.

Finally, there were no more obstacles! Sinclair grinned, gritting her teeth in pain as she raised the dagger in her right hand once more. In less than half a second, she could slash thirty times to cut this mage in front of her into pieces. She would only keep his head, heart, and organs; the only parts of him that were valuable.

The tip of the dagger would start with his crotch. Richard's keen awareness as a mage told him that this demon in front of him had at least fifteen strikes lined up for it. She believed it would give him an unforgettable memory as he neared his death. In her opinion, the more terrified one was before death the more delicious their heart would be.

However, what met her was not a panic-stricken teen but a man and his sword. Her gaze was attracted to an eye-catching scarlet moon atop his forehead.

Richard had the nameless sword held up high, the power of Eruption combining with scarlet moonforce, putting his abilities on full display. There were no yells or roars, a mere calm swing towards his enemy. The energy formed a crescent in the direction of his strike, forcing Sinclair to block. The secret sword of Silvermoon had stopped her in her tracks; had she forced the issue, he would have cut her in two before she could even start her 'operation.'

"A sword art? Isn't that the power of the scarlet moon? HOW IS THIS POSSIBLE?!" Sinclair yelled in shock. However, her blades still struck towards Richard without hesitation.

With the support of Eruption, Richard's body was surging with power. The moon atop his head grew clearer and clearer, the secret swords of Silvermoon being boosted in power. All of Sinclair's movements were encompassed within the range of his moonforce, forcing her to retreat from a fatal blow.

Under the brilliance of that half moon, the two were fighting evenly!

The insides of Richard's body were burning, every surge of power from his bloodline accompanied by severe pain. Eruption was destroying his nerves and blood vessels like it was lava. Thankfully, he only needed to hold on for a short while until his team could surround Sinclair once more. The demonic girl whose body was still burning in magical fires was no longer invisible, and the power of the Lens of Time was displayed as well. Although Sinclair had forced the spell to break, she had suffered great damage for doing so. Her movements had been slowed down.

Numbers were still leaping up everywhere in his vision. Richard clearly knew that Sinclair had suffered far worse injuries than he had, so he just clenched his teeth and persevered. He switched from secret sword to secret sword as though he was mad, completely disregarding the consequences.

Sinclair attacked twice more, but then she suddenly let out a wailing scream. She flipped into the air and leapt over Waterflower's head, raining blows onto the young lady. Numerous clangs rang through the air as the two brushed past one another.

Sinclair was left with another shallow wound on her chest, but a dense black energy was visibly wrapped around this one. However, Waterflower's wound was much more serious. Her abdomen was almost completely cut open, exposing her wriggling intestines.

The young lady stumbled back, almost falling down. However, she clenched her teeth and covered the horrible wounds with her left hand. The blade of her sword was still vibrating slightly, ready to launch a fatal blow at any time!

"Waterflower! Back off!" Richard shouted desperately. However, the young lady did not bother. She was still staring at her opponent like a wolf, even crouching low in preparation to pounce.

Sinclair saw the runes on her abdomen, before looking down at the black energy spreading from her own wound as she cried out once more, "Runes! You have a rune set!"

Even a grade 1 set created by a master that was compatible with its user was comparable to all of her grade 3 runes, barring Dark Sacrifice. Sinclair's runes were just selected for individual purposes, so they weren't a set at all. Seeing a rune set on a young level 10 girl was astonishing. There had been many unexpected surprises this night.

She wanted to pounce on Waterflower once more, but silver moonlight flashed down before her eyes. The moonforce disgusted and terrified her; several injuries had left her fearful of coming into contact with this unknown power. She thus fled in horror, leaving her original position.

However, the expected attack did not come. Sinclair lifted her head, only to see Richard waving his sword. The silver moon over his head flashed—its intention was not to attack, but to frighten.

Richard's face was pale, the hands holding his sword trembling. Yet, Sinclair did not dare to launch a hasty attack. The Snow Moon left her feeling a strong sense of danger. Throughout this battle she hadn't been able to see through this mage or anticipate his actions, so she didn't know whether this weakness was just a trap. Although the opponent in front of her was a mere level 10 mage, she no longer had the confidence to kill him in one blow.

Hesitation was not tolerable in the battlefield. The warriors from the two wings drew close, and countless weapons stabbed into Sinclair.

Flowsand quietly appeared behind Waterflower, hugging her and dragging her away from the frontlines. Waterflower struggled at first, but when she turned her head she saw streams of amber liquid flowing down from the cleric's eyes, nostrils, and lips. This was her blood, fused with divine power. It was the price she had paid for forcing the Lens of Time on Sinclair.

Book 2, Chapter 144

Life and Death As One(3)

Waterflower's eyes lightly twitched, and she allowed Flowsand to take her away. The blow from Sinclair's blade had a lot of negative energy on it, and although she was stubbornly resisting it all to stand there a mere puff of wind would knock her to the ground...

With the fear of death having passed, Sinclair's hysteria gradually faded away. She could still kill normal soldiers with ease, making her feel like her injuries weren't nearly as bad as she thought they were. At the very least, there was still a chance of survival.

She finally chose to retreat, dodging a strike from Gangdor before rushing towards the castle walls. A few other soldiers dropped dead on the way, with none the wiser as to how she had done it.

Before she managed to get away, Richard cast a profound glance her way. His gaze was clear and unperturbed, but nobody could comprehend the intent behind it. For some reason, the Schumpeter girl felt a strange chill permeating her heart, damping her rage and frustration. The experience of countless fights told her that some people didn't bellow and rage against their opponents.

When she finally reached the walls, Sinclair stopped and turned around, holding her daggers up as she cast a menacing death glare at everyone nearby. The bearguard knights were already down below, and the guards at the main gate weren't competent enough to hold them off. She would wait here until her soldiers scaled the walls, giving them the opportunity to kill everyone in the castle.

Fontaine and Waterflower had already lost all of their strength, no longer posing a threat. Richard's earlier display of skill came as a surprise, but thinking it over rationally she could tell that it was nothing more than a desperate fight for his life. She wouldn't even

need to face the mage directly; she could wait in a corner until he drained all of his energy.

However, Richard's cold voice sounded from the distance, "You're trying to delay for time? Not so fast!"

Richard took out the Book of Holding once more, and two more warriors of darkness stepped out to surround Sinclair. With the limited space on the battlements, these warriors who had immense strength and a lack of fear for their lives were boosted greatly. They waved heavy axes against their opponent, tiring her out as she was forced to block again and again.

Another warrior of darkness quickly appeared as well, this time summoned at the ground in front of her position. This had been Richard's directive, forcing the two bearguard knights who wanted to scale the wall there to fight it first. The warrior wouldn't last long in a 1 vs 2 battle, but all it needed to do was stall for time and put Sinclair in even more danger.

Sinclair held another heart in her hands. Although she would normally feel like this heart was unpalatable, she wolfed it down in a few bites without hesitation. However, she didn't manage to absorb the energy within, instead coughing violently as black blood spurted out of her mouth. The rune on her left breast started leaking blood as well.

Some of the bearguard knights had finished scaling the wall by this point, but they were faced with countless pikes and heavy axes, fighting warriors skilled in both offence and defence. Every swing of their axes reaped a few lives, but they suffered several injuries each time as well. The baron's elites, Richard's knights, and the barbarian warriors were all capable of causing damage, and surrounded as they were the bearguard knights couldn't hide themselves. Defence wasn't the bearguard forte either— a knight off his horse lost half of his manoeuvrability.

Zendrall was hidden in the darkness, summoning warriors of

darkness one after the other. With how chaotic the battle had become, these level 12 undead creatures could make full use of their might.

Richard was constantly moving his forces to resist the bearguard knights, at the same time keeping an eye on Sinclair atop the walls. Even though she was constantly digging out hearts and consuming them, her injuries showed no signs of recovery. In fact, it seemed as though some force was interfering with her rune, making things worse every time she absorbed energy. She was stubbornly trying to fend off her attackers, waiting for the knights below to finish off the warrior of darkness and scale the walls.

Richard had to grit his teeth to fight the weakness from using Eruption. He was handing out spells like water, trying to weaken the bearguard knights and buff his own warriors. The entire battle seemed like a complex alchemic machine, constantly moving the way he envisioned thing.

There was a desperate battle at the side of every bearguard knight. He watched as the troll brothers dragged one each and leapt off the walls, crashing down together. The impact of the fall left both parties unable to get up, but the bearguard knights suffered far more damage under the combined weight. Without the remarkable regeneration that the trolls boasted of, they would not get up again. The trolls would eventually continue battling, but they would turn into armoured corpses.

On another side of the battlefield, three barbarian warriors armed with spears had pierced into a knight's body from three directions. Desert warriors and Fontaine's troops moved in from behind, jabbing through the crevices in the knight's armour continuously. The knight managed to remain standing despite being pierced everywhere, roaring as he waved his fists and knocked down the enemies nearby. A knight suddenly leapt up and waved the large two-handed sword in his hand, slashing half the bearguard knight's neck off. The fellow roared in pain, grabbing

the knight's legs in his dying moments and ripping him in two mid-air. Only after that did he slowly collapse.

Blood was flowing everywhere.

At that thought, Richard's gaze inadvertently swept back to Sinclair. Her charming face was stained with black blood, the broken rune on her chest also gushing reddish-black liquid. He felt a strong sense of disgust, a natural loathing that seemed to come from his elven blood. This was no illusion, instead true antagonism between two polar opposites.

Irked by the black blood, Richard's own silvermoon blood grew exceedingly powerful. It started boiling with energy, as though urging him into battle. Richard muttered to himself as several thoughts flashed through his mind, eventually deciding on something inconceivable.

He estimated the distance between himself and Sinclair, suddenly stepping forward as a jade green moon appeared atop his head.

The third moon, the green moon. The corresponding secret sword was Devout Prayer, a skill that was equivalent to a cleric's healing. The sword's user could cast it upon themselves, or cast it on the sword's target. This was Richard's first successful attempt at using this skill, jade green light slowly radiating from his body. Mosses started to grow on the floor below him, forming a sheet of green..

Sinclair had no idea of what was happening at first, but her keen senses told her something very dangerous was happening. She instinctively tried to evade, her figure starting to fade into the night. However, the skill had already formed a beam of jade-green light that fell down on her position, giving off an aura of vitality that seemed to envelop the entire sky. Her figure grew visible once more.

This skill that would normally heal injured people caused the girl

to scream!

The moonlight started to corrode Sinclair's skin the moment it touched her, creating a large cloud of fog. It was as though she was being burned by the strongest of acids as the beam shone on her perfect skin, the exposed flesh from her wounds starting to melt. She shrieked and jumped off the castle walls, but the green moonlight refused to let her go, only fading away once all its energy was used up.

The manticore leapt out from the darkness, catching its mistress. It had already devoured twenty knights in the midst of this chaos, but that only slightly helped sate its empty stomach. The soul-reading had left it far too hungry, and alas there were too few powerful fighters on the battlefield.

Sinclair could barely manage to sit on the beast, her charming face charred beyond recognition by the moonlight. She had to use all her effort to avoid falling off the creature's back.

She glared at Richard with immense loathing with a swollen red right eye, her left already blinded by the attack. She pointed a finger at him and hoarsely cried out, "Darling! Eat him, don't leave a single bone! Remember to leave the heart for me! Take all his women with your tail, I'LL TORTURE THEM FOR TEN DAYS BEFORE KILLING THEM!"

The manticore let out a low roar, quickly getting up. However, it didn't rush towards the top of the castle, instead turning its body around as it sent a threatening roar into the distant darkness.

Sinclair was astonished. This manticore was a creature she had reared from its youth, and it possessed human-like intellect. It was extremely rare for it to defy her orders.

She suddenly turned around, seeing Richard look at her with a determined gaze from atop the walls. He pointed towards her, before making an action of slashing his own throat.

The broodmother had finally entered the battlefield.

Book 2, Chapter 145

The Broodmother Enters Battle

Richard cast one last glance at Sinclair from atop the castle walls, never looking at her again. He struggled to keep himself from blacking out, waves of dizziness washing over him in his exhaustion. He willed himself on, staying clear-headed and awake as he continued to oversee the defense.

He had to eradicate this incoming army before he could eliminate Sinclair. Nobody knew how long his skill and Flowsand's divine flames would last, or how much power the young lady still had remaining. He had to kill and injure as many of the bearguard knights as possible she could conceal herself and launch her attacks once more. This battle was a race against time.

The wind wolves had already spread out in an arc around the battlefield, closing in with the broodmother at the helm. The battle was still gory and intense, tens of soldiers dying with missing limbs. The bearguard knights were thrown off the walls one by one, roaring as they fell to their deaths. The soldiers were using their very lives to stop these foreign demons from making their way up.

The vicious magical horses lingered around at the foot of the castle, tearing the opposing soldiers apart. Anyone that fell down, be it a warrior of darkness, a normal soldier, or a half-orc, was bitten to pieces. At times they cooperated with their masters who were trying to hack the gates apart, collectively ramming into the iron as if they were a battering ram. Sparks could be seen every now and then, and it didn't take long for the gates to be dented everywhere. Cracks that were wide enough to let light seep through were forming as well.

The soldiers behind the doors were doing everything they could to reinforce the defences, while a mage's forehead was covered in

sweat as he prepared a long, tedious, area spell. Even with a scroll in hand, this spell took a long time to chant while every syllable had to be pronounced perfectly. Once complete, a two-metre-tall barrier would rise out of the ground, becoming a stable fortification. All of them had already witnessed the prowess of the bearguard knights' captain, they absolutely couldn't allow these demons to barge in on their magical beasts!

Medium Rare and Tiramisu were fighting the horses at the base of the castle. They were the only ones who had managed to get up from the fall, continuing to battle fiercely. Although Tiramisu was casting stone skin on himself and his brother at the slightest chance, they were both covered in cuts and bruises all over as a result of the bites. Fortunately, Olar had found a good spot at the top of the walls that allowed him to support them with his warsong and bow.

Richard bit his lower lip, trying hard to maintain his inner composure. He calmly sent out order after order, directing the mix of soldiers on the battlefield.

More than ten elites and fifty soldiers had been lost during the battle with Sinclair, but now that Richard had command the damage was immediately brought under control. Ordered formations displayed great offensive and defensive capabilities; although a few lives were still taken by every blow of the bearguard knights' giant axes, other soldiers would fill up the empty space in the blink of an eye.

This victory would be built on the lives of countless men, but that was also the only way it would arrive. The faces of the barbarians, desert warriors, and the baron's own elites were completely taut, their eyes blazing red. They charged forwards dauntlessly, wave after wave, without any fear of death.

In Richard's eyes, the battle that seemed to be complete chaos had already reached a pivotal moment. Although he still didn't have complete assurance of victory, he wasn't willing to wait

anymore. He sent a command to the wind wolves and broodmother, launching the attack!

The great mage under Sinclair was rapidly approaching Twilight Castle in the cover of the dark. The defence had succeeded with the terrain-changing spell, leaving them with no choice but to attack and occupy the walls. More than half of the bearguard knights had already made their way onto the castle, a few of them reaching the top of the towers and cutting the ballistae to pieces. The greatest threat to his life had been eliminated.

What the Schumpeter army didn't know was that each of the ballistae had only come with two bolts. These bolts that could track enemies were far too expensive, and even two each had taken more than a decade to acquire.

The great mage didn't make it far before he suddenly stopped in his tracks, looking around warily. Huge wolves emerged from the thick fog one after the other, the same as the soulless wolves they had encountered before.

The great mage grew anxious. Although these wolves weren't very powerful, they somehow gave off a strong sense of danger. More and more showed up with every moment, seeming like an endless stream. One of these wolves was clearly much bigger than the rest, watching him attentively. For a moment, the mage felt like he was being watched by a human.

And indeed, back on the castle walls Richard's vision had synchronised with that of this elite. The great mage was cautious and didn't dare to act hastily, but that was exactly what he wished for. These were his wind wolves, not normal beasts who only knew to pounce at first sight.

'Inner circle flat down, middle circle crouching, outer circle tall!' Richard commanded the elites. The two then let out numerous long howls, directing the packs under them just like captains taking orders from their general. This way, Richard only needed to

issue a few orders which allowed him to conserve a great deal of energy.'

"Damn it!" Although these creatures weren't behaving like ordinary wolves that were about to pounce, the great mage was instinctively aware that this was nothing good. These huge wolves were just too orderly in their movements! They resembled a well-trained army, so adjusted to uniformity that it frightened him.

He couldn't care anymore about his precious advanced scrolls, unravelling one that could teleport him away to a random location. Even a great mage needed a brief chant to use such a powerful scroll, so he cast a barrier around himself before he started. This would be a short chant, only needing fifteen seconds. Even if these wolves tried to pounce on him, he would be able to last that period of time.

However, Richard had already issued another command, 'Fire!'

An explosion sounded as hundreds of wind blades shot out from the mouths of the wind wolves, converging on the mage and breaking through his shield at once. Countless injuries riddled his body in an instant, arrows of blood shooting out and gathering into a cloud of blood mist. He then split apart into countless lumps of flesh, collapsing to the ground with a loud thud as if he was a destroyed pillar.

The two powerful armies then surged past the great mage like currents, charging towards Sinclair who was at the foot of the castle.

Sinclair felt an indescribable fear from atop the manticore. The mist was too thick for her to look hundreds of metres away with the naked eye, particularly so towards the forest as dense fog masked everything in darkness. She wasn't sure what on earth had happened to the distant great mage; why on earth had he still not rushed over so long after she'd sent the signal?

Book 2, Chapter 146

The Broodmother Enters Battle(2)

The bearguard knights kept collapsing one after the other. Even though each one took a significant number of enemy soldiers down with them, these were quasi-rune knights, irreplaceable elites. Their loyalty and skill were unquestionable, but those who died on Richard's side? They were barbarians, desert warriors, and the inhabitants of this plane. They were all assets seized from Faelor, the only loyal ones being those few knights Richard had brought over from Norland. However, even ten such knights weren't as important as a single bearguard knight to Sinclair.

Although the green light on her body had already started to fade, the pain from her burning wounds was only just starting to ease. The pale gold flames were so dull at this point they might as well be non-existent. She started to ponder: once she regained mobility, should she first kill or capture Richard, or save a few of the knights? It would be difficult to expand and develop in this foreign plane without loyal subordinates. Without the Eternal Dragon's divine favour upon her, she wasn't willing to waste her precious life on this lowly foreign plane.

At that moment, the manticore's body started to crouch as dark green flames started to fire out of its nostrils. It looked like there were terrifying enemies hidden in the fog.

Just as Sinclair was contemplating things, wind wolves started streaming out of the mist. They surrounded the manticore quickly, starting to howl loudly. However, they didn't instantly pounce on the creature. They stopped in their tracks, sending a volley of wind blades its way.

These attacks would cause limited damage to the manticore, at most causing small cuts on its body that wouldn't even make it through its skin. However, there were just too many of them.

Sinclair scanned the scene and figured there were more than three hundred of these huge wolves surrounding her, making it clear that these soulless creatures were definitely sent by someone. Perhaps it was even Richard from atop the castle walls!

A rain of wind blades buffeted the manticore, causing the enormous creature to howl loudly with rage. It sent the occasional counter out, using its big claws and sharp teeth to cut into the wind wolves. This was a level 16 creature; it wasn't impossible for it to kill these level 7 enemies. However, despite the desperate situation the manticore seemed fearful and wary of something, not daring to let go and start a slaughter.

Sinclair eventually decided to leave the damned place, grabbing onto the creature's mane with force as she shouted, "Darling! Kill all of them, then let's leave this place! Quick... AHH, WHAT'S THAT?!"

Less than a hundred metres away, the thick fog separated to reveal an enormous black shadow. Sinclair had seen all sorts of magical beasts before, but looking at this huge creature that was six or seven metres tall and about thirty metres long, she was still overwhelmed with shock. Compared to the broodmother, her manticore was just a meek little cat.

Of course, this 'cat' quickly broke away from the pack of wolves, swiftly charging towards this newcomer. It easily leapt onto the broodmother's back, ferociously digging in. Its senses told it that this was the most dangerous enemy.

Even though the broodmother's shell was hard as steel, it was hardly able to fend off this desperate attack. The manticore's claws were about half a metre long, digging deep into its back. Its sharp tail pierced into the broodmother's unbelievably small head, the entirety of the deadly venom within emptied within. The manticore's breathing instantly grew faint.

This venom was deadly enough to kill off an entire city, but the

broodmother was only slightly impaired. It carried the manticore on its way to Twilight Castle as if nothing had happened. It was immune to poison and acid, making it the manticore's nemesis. And although the head had turned to mush from the manticore's attacks, it had somehow managed to get its small but strangely sharp pincers onto the tail.

The pincers eventually cut the manticore's tail in two, causing it to shriek in pain as it almost threw Sinclair off.

The creature had poured all its strength into the initial engagement. Sinclair only had so much control over it, and devoid of all fighting strength she could only hold on tightly as she hoped to not be thrown off. Her one free hand held tightly onto her two blades as she continually tried to muster her energy, but the damage from the green moonlight was far too intense. Whenever her energy tried to surface, it would clash with the remaining moonforce on her wounds and boil, causing her soul-piercing pain.

The manticore continued to dig into the broodmother, but couldn't penetrate the shell. The broodmother's shell was a metre thick, and the manticore had to drill relentlessly to reach its insides. The broodmother was different from most normal insects; the head only contained its breathing apparatus and some eyes. Its destruction had absolutely no impact on its function. The small size wasn't a detriment but rather a trap.

The surrounding wind wolves stopped in their tracks, opening their mouths as one in the manticore's direction. The hairs on this hybrid of scorpions and lions rose, and it felt the urge to leap up and run away. However, it felt an indescribably sharp pain in its mind, its four limbs weakening as it collapsed on the broodmother's back.

The broodmother had launched its mental attack. The full force of the ability would only slow the manticore down by a few seconds, but even such a slight delay was extremely deadly at the moment.

“NOO!” Sinclair screeched, burying herself in the manticore’s mane. In the next moment she felt countless knives streaking across her back, the pain and fear making her shriek hysterically. In a moment of desperation she launched some attacks of her own from her daggers, managing to bring down some of the wolves, but the moonforce mixed with her energy to make her feel like she was boiling from head to toe.

The three hundred wind blades fell down like a rainstorm, enveloping the broodmother. Half of them landed on her enormous body, cutting out countless pieces of carapace or the thick, creased skin from its belly, while the other half ploughed through the manticore and Sinclair. The manticore’s mane, black blood, and pieces of broken armour and hair danced in the wind, following which black blood spewed out like a dark fog.

Sinclair lost all strength in her grip, tumbling down from the manticore and crashing to the ground before she went completely still.

The manticore cried out in pain, sliding down from the broodmother’s body. A single wind blade couldn’t cause much harm to it, but there were simply too many. Flesh spilled out of its torn skin, the bleeding alone enough to kill it. The pain rendered it insane, causing it to ditch its mistress in an attempt to escape alone.

“Stop it!” Richard and the broodmother ordered simultaneously. The wind wolves who had fully exhausted their wind blades surged forward, pouncing on the manticore and biting down. Their teeth and claws could not breach the creature’s defences, but as long as they didn’t let go it was effective at stopping its escape. With so many wind wolves clinging onto its body, the manticore’s speed was greatly reduced. Its ferocity showed itself as it retaliated, tearing the wind wolves to shreds in seconds.

Richard was watching this crucial battle from atop the castle walls. Once he saw the manticore stop moving, he coldly ordered,

“Broodmother, acid spray!”

The broodmother suddenly lifted its upper body, the rotting head dislodging to reveal new breathing apparatus underneath. A dark green acid spewed out, travelling the ten metres to completely cover the manticore!

Book 2, Chapter 147

The Broodmother Enters Battle(3)

Tens of wind wolves were still hanging onto the manticore, scorched by the acid alongside it. The liquid was strong enough to corrode even steel, and as the wolves' fur and skin melted away they dropped off the manticore in quick succession. They rolled on the ground a few times before they stopped moving, turning into a black mess in a flash.

The manticore only grew more crazy after the acid spray, rapidly killing the few wolves still sticking to it as it tried to escape once more. However, before it could turn around the broodmother had used another mind flay to attack it, paralysing it until scores of wind wolves leapt on once more and held it down with their body weight. A few seconds later, the dense acid doused the manticore once more.

The broodmother quieted down, not moving any more. It had used up all of its acid, and the two mental attacks had taken all of its energy. The manticore's skin was completely corroded, its entire exterior melted away. The creature was left lying lifelessly on the ground, the remaining half of its sting twitching involuntarily.

The battle at the castle hadn't yet ended, but it was coming close. Ten-odd fierce bearguard knights were still stubbornly fighting atop the walls, while the elites led the remaining wind wolves to fight below.

Seeing the fight drawing to a close, Richard's determination was like the string of an instrument that had reached its limit. He was close to breaking, his vision blurring even as his lungs felt like they were on fire.

The entire battlefield reeked of blood, while the acidic mist and poisonous fog from the creatures continued to float around. Some

of it had even made it to the castle walls, turning the ash-white stone black. The human warriors on top were left gasping weakly for a long time, while someone grasped their own throat and fell to the ground screaming.

Richard bit his tongue hard, forcing himself to stay awake as he issued order after order. His brave warriors already obeyed all his orders on instinct, and once his commands rang out his own soldiers started a silent retreat as Fontaine's elite subordinates continued charging towards the bearguard knights with reckless abandon.

The Schumpeter knights knew by this point that their mission would end in death. This knowledge only made them fiercer, taking down their opponents with abandon. Every time the baron's men fell down, even more surged in to fill the vacant space. This tactic pushed their demonic enemies towards their death.

This war of attrition was not unlike a meat grinder. With the battle having reached a conclusion, this was their most desperate moment. Richard sighed in his heart but he had no choice to force himself to regain his icy calm. His strategy at this point was quite simple; all he wanted was for his own soldiers to fall back from the war zone.

Many of the baron's warriors had a dazzling glow on their bodies, the mark of a magic blessing. However, Flowsand's spell had been changed slightly; the magnification to their abilities was no different, but she had added a motivating force in. Anyone blessed by her suddenly had the courage to face whatever enemy was put before them. Even faced with ten thousand soldiers, they would still have the courage to charge forward!

This was definitely a result of the cleric's research into the God of Valour's powers. However, its current purpose was slightly different; the warriors blessed by her only had the bearguard knights in their sight, having no qualms with heading to their

deaths on the frontlines. They used their very lives to leave injuries on these demonic opponents.

Once the last bearguard knight fell with a loud thud, the bitter war finally came to a close. Richard slowly swept his eyes across the battlefield, seeing blood, corpses, and severed limbs everywhere. Not many people could still manage to stand upright. As for the number of deaths, even without a headcount he feared it was almost a thousand. And that was even excluding the baron's knights and warriors! Even though Richard had tried to save some of his army towards the end of the battle, there were only about a hundred people left.

His mind finally relaxed, but that only caused him to grow dizzy. He could barely remain standing, but thankfully a vitality spell kept him from fainting.

"How is Waterflower?" Richard asked eagerly as he saw Flowsand walking towards him.

"Her injuries are stable, she's fine." Flowsand seemed like she would black out at any time. She had her mouth covered with a handkerchief, making her voice seem lower than usual. Richard could sense her weakness; her injuries were definitely not mild. She'd used some unknown method to draw out her mana at the beginning of the battle, growing her power by about three levels. This was the only reason the Lens of Time had been successful against Sinclair, causing this dangerous enemy to suffer heavy injuries, completely turning the battle around.

"What about you?" Richard continued.

Still covering her mouth, Flowsand spoke up, "I used too much of my mana, I'll be fine after a few days of rest."

"A few days of rest?" Richard's shining gaze landed on Flowsand. A forced leap in level, and it was three levels at that, would definitely have heavy consequences. Even though he wasn't extremely familiar with the clergy, that much was general

knowledge.

Flowsand helplessly smiled a weak smile, “Alright, I did indeed pay a heavy price. But don’t worry, I can I can fully accept this. I can even do it a few more times.”

Richard nodded his head, choosing to believe her. At that moment, Olar came to Richard’s side and whispered, “Master, Sinclair is still alive. How do you want to take care of this?”

A cold glimmer flashed in Richard’s eyes as he brought the few of his party who could still walk down the castle, reaching the empty space outside. They walked all the way to Sinclair’s side before finally stopping.

Gangdor frowned, taking half a step forward to use his body as a shield. A skilled assassin like Sinclair would most likely try one last attack in her dying moments. However, Richard shook his head and reached out to pull the brute back, “It’s alright, she can’t strike back anymore.”

The closer he got to Sinclair, the more vigorous the elven blood grew. Even his Archeron bloodline was starting to stir. This was a two-way street, but it ensured that the assassin couldn’t hide the condition of her body from his eyes.

Sinclair was no longer the pretty young lady, her entire body filled with injuries. The black blood seeping out was like hot lava, leaving deep burns on her skin. Richard could sense the remaining effects of the green moonforce coupling with the black blood; it carried a sense of impending death, being the reason for the surge in her body temperature.

Richard kneeled by Sinclair’s side, gazing at this most worthy enemy. Even though her skin had been burnt, even with one of her eyes blinded, one could still see traces of her original beauty on her face. She was like a human doll that had been destroyed.

Book 2, Chapter 148

An End And A Beginning

Sinclair seemed to notice Richard's gaze, tilting her head and making a huge effort to look at him with her one eye. She smiled at him, but it wasn't the charming smile she once had. There was an unspeakable melancholy behind the expression; this was a smile that would make others sympathise with her helplessness.

"I... look awful now, don't I?"

Richard hadn't expected this to be her first sentence. He hesitated for a while before nodding.

"Ha! You mages are a bunch of dull characters," Sinclair laughed in self-mockery, "I... I want to live on, can I surrender? My body is very special, given some time I'll slowly return to normal. There's no need to worry about my ability in combat."

"That was never my concern," Richard said calmly, "But you..."

He stretched out his hand. Olar, who was adept at reading his body language at this point, immediately tossed a dagger over. The dagger was surprisingly heavy and cold, a chill permeating Richard's body the moment he touched its handle. Originally left with the last dredges of his energy, Richard felt the cold surge through him like a tide as it stimulated the moonforce within, like cool water that refreshed his spirit. He felt strange, realising that the elven bard had given him one of Sinclair's daggers.

Richard held the dagger as he continued, "Some hostilities can never be erased. However, if you can share the reason for your presence and give me some details about the Schumpeters, I won't harvest your runes in your death."

Once the removal of the rune was mentioned, Sinclair couldn't help but shudder. Her rune hadn't been slotted in, instead tattooed onto her body. If it were removed, her corpse would be left an

unrecognisable mess. Even though she didn't want to die, she was not afraid of death. However, death at the hands of a runemaster would definitely not end well.

The young lady inarticulately expressed that three families had joined forces to offer a sacrifice to the Eternal Dragon, changing Richard's destination. Even though their offering was extremely valuable, there were many rules and limitations to the effects. The Dragon would not allow Richard's destination to have a stable passage, nor would it allow a change in the basic characteristics of the destination plane. They had to find a new plane, one not registered with the Church, with fewer restrictions on level. The end result had surpassed everyone's expectations, landing both parties in the unknown plane of Faelor. Moreover, those of this plane surprisingly could possess legendary might!

Sinclair's mission was to kill Richard, the cost of transportation being shared by the three families.

Sinclair's answers validated Richard's prior suspicions. However, he still held onto a last glimmer of hope as he asked, "Do you have the coordinates to return to Norland?"

Sinclair forced out a smile, "If I did, I would have returned long ago. You should be well aware just how valuable a plane of this level is. Pity; our Lighthouse of Time was extinguished when we left the portal."

Richard sighed before finally saying, "Do you have anything else you want to say?"

Sinclair started coughing violently, only able to speak after some time had passed, "If you... If you manage to get back to Norland in the future... Help me... Help me kill the entire senior generation of the Schumpeters... All of them! Kill them, kill their families... Don't leave anyone. Also, kill that bitch Sisley. But... But torture her as long as you can, don't let her die so easily!"

Richard was slightly shocked, asking, "You seem to have a lot of

hatred for your family and Sisley? Isn't she your twin sister? The people call you two the Schumpeter flowers."

"Sister? Haha, yes, sister..." Sinclair laughed once more, but this time her smile was distorted and her voice strange. She continued mumbling, "She's the older twin, but her training speed was slower than mine. When I was fourteen years old, she thought of a plan to sabotage me... I... I was brought to the elders for a trial... "interrogated" by nine old men... for an entire night! That was when I first became a woman... It was with nine men at once, each at least thrice my age... No matter how many men and women I've had in my life... I haven't been able to erase... them from memory. My father... he was only a small character in the family at the time... He used the situation to ask for favours from the elders, making his title hereditary... This is why I want to kill them all... All these matters... I can slowly tell you about them in the future... I remember every detail of that night..."

"Not interested." Richard plunged the blade into Sinclair's heart, cutting it apart. Sinclair's body shook; her eyes turned wide in shock, but they eventually turned into an expression of release before they closed forever.

He stood up and looked over the corpse, many regrets coming to mind. This mighty, beautiful, yet insane young lady had turned into just another corpse. There were many stories behind her madness, but with her death all of her glory and hatred had been reduced to a heap of yellow soil. His own perseverance in battle, his constant strive to move forward... Did it have any meaning?

His contemplation was interrupted by the broodmother's voice, "Master, I need the manticore's body. If I eat it, I might be able to add an ability to my drones."

"Good!" Richard immediately agreed. The final reason for their victory in this battle was still the broodmother. It had sacrificed over four hundred of its wolves, relying solely on strength in numbers to crush the manticore, great mage, and many magic

horses to death. The sheer number of wolves was in effect a fundamental change to their power.

The broodmother had used up all its energy. Not wanting to move at all, it directed the remaining wind wolves to push the large manticore over, starting to eat.

Richard cast one last glance at Sinclair's body, about to have her cremated. Suddenly, the broodmother's voice sounded again, "Master, this woman is very important. If I get her body, I might be able to acquire a very important ability. It is related to divinity."

Richard frowned, "About that...Let me think about it."

Even though Sinclair was an enemy to the death, and the broodmother's battle capabilities were of utmost importance, Richard still had a problem with her devouring humans, live or as corpses. Just as he was hesitating, the fallen cleric Kars hurriedly rushed over to him, "Master, Miss Flowsand wanted me to tell you that she wants Sinclair's corpse. It's very important to her."

Book 2, Chapter 149

An End And A Beginning(2)

By this time, Zendrall had finished unsummoning the remaining warriors of darkness. The necromancer came out from the castle, his eyes glowing the moment they landed on Sinclair's lifeless body, "Give her to me! Half a month, and I'll be able to turn her into a formidable black knight, level 15 at minimum! Give me the manticore's carcass too! I'll be able to... Wait, what? Is it eating the manticore? NOOO! It was such a powerful corpse to work with!"

Zendrall pointed towards the broodmother, yelling in grief. His normal composure was completely gone; he had never been close to the fresh corpse of such a powerful being before, and he never might. Most important was that the souls hadn't fully dissipated yet. If he acquired these corpses, he could attain new peaks in necromancy.

"The broodmother gets the manticore," Richard announced. Even though Zendrall's warriors of darkness weren't too shabby, they weren't all that great either. Giving him the manticore would only have a limited effect on the army's power. On the other hand, the broodmother was stronger and more dependable. Its abilities would only grow in the future. Richard finally understood why high priestess Ferlyn had once called it a weapon on a planar scale.

The manticore's specialty was its lethal venom. Devouring it would allow the broodmother to give the wind wolves this ability as well. Even if the drones didn't advance in level, their fighting prowess would increase substantially. This was very important—few beings in the myriad planes were resistant to poison.

But why did Flowsand want Sinclair's corpse? Was she interested in necromancy as well? Interestingly, that request didn't garner any aversion from the broodmother like Zendrall's did.

'Wait, did Flowsand ask for the corpse on the broodmother's

behalf?' Richard suddenly had a brainwave.

He ordered his subordinates to look over Sinclair's corpse, prohibiting anyone from touching it. He then hurried to the room Flowsand was resting in. He only had one question for her, "Did you want Sinclair's corpse for the broodmother?"

Flowsand propped herself up with some difficulty, "How did you find out?"

"A wild guess," Richard sighed, "Will it be a great benefit?"

"Anyone with great power will, yes."

"But that would mean she starts to eat people," Richard argued helplessly, "What if she gets used to it..."

"But she only follows your commands," Flowsand explained patiently. She was saying that as long as Richard could control himself, the broodmother would be able to as well.

Richard furrowed his brows, "So you're saying she's eaten humans before?"

The broodmother's original request had made him feel somewhat uneasy. The possibility brought his mind to the bans he had set for her before. However, before he could even react to the possibility, Flowsand came clean, "I allowed her to do it. Powerful beings, regardless of species, greatly help the broodmother's advancement. If not for Sir Menta's corpse, she wouldn't have the strength boost for the raptors."

Richard looked at this young lady he had intimate relations with, only feeling that there were more and more things he didn't know about her. However, the one thing he was certain of was what her intent was: she had stepped forward to make tough decisions for the sake of their party because she didn't want him to bear the bulk of the guilt.

She would stand alone in the darkness, giving him the chance to be in the limelight.

Richard pondered over things for a while before looking up, his eyes clear and determined, “Do you enjoy such things?”

Flowsand was rendered silent for a while, but she eventually shook her head, “No, I don’t. But someone has to do it.”

“If you don’t like doing it, then don’t.” Richard smiled weakly, tilting the girl’s chin up and gently planting a kiss on her lips. “Let me make these decisions in the future.” Having said that, he turned to leave the room.

“Wait... No! You can’t possibly do all that! I’m already used to making these decisions!” Flowsand panicked, leaping down from her bed in an attempt to hold onto him. However, she was so weak that her legs gave way the moment she got off.

Richard turned back, managing to catch her before she fell to the floor. He then locked her in an embrace, looking solemnly into her eyes, “Yes, Flowsand, these things have to be done. And someone has to do it. In that case, I’d rather do them myself than have you suffer. I don’t want your dainty hands sullied by such dark things.”

He then grasped her hands, gently pecking her on the cheeks before carrying her back to the bed. He covered her with the sheets, going back outside.

Flowsand watched on as Richard disappeared out the door. Her eyes were wide open, but her face showed no emotion. One could not tell whether she was happy or distressed...

Richard quickly returned to the base of the castle. Sinclair’s corpse was still in its original position; Gangdor had brought ten soldiers to guard the area as they awaited his return. This wasn’t to defend against enemies, but the necromancer on their own side.

Zendrall was very persistent towards the possibility of his first ever black knight. The more he observed Sinclair’s corpse, the more he felt that he could turn it into a black knight of such strength that it had never been seen before. He even felt like he

could turn Sinclair into a black warlord! The warlord could advance in level if the God of Death blessed it, having an independent mind of its own!

By this point, the broodmother had already completely ingested the manticore. She had entered a quiet rest; her head was turned in Sinclair's direction, but nobody knew whether she was paying attention to the corpse. Only Zendrall, extremely sensitive to spirits and souls as he was, could feel a formidable consciousness resting on the corpse. To think he had once almost controlled this magnificent creature by force; only months later, the power of its consciousness rivalled that of his own.

Richard hurried over and waved to the broodmother, "Take it, it's yours."

"Master Richard, but..." Zendrall still wished to fight for Sinclair's corpse, but Richard had already made up his mind.

"Master, please have everyone take a step back. I can't let them see me eating the corpse this time," the broodmother relayed to his mind. In turn, he ordered Gangdor and the rest to move twenty metres away from Sinclair.

The broodmother slowly crawled over, giving off a dense, sour-smelling fog which engulfed the entire area and blocked all vision. She then used her joints to prop up her enormous body, before the armour on her belly opened up to reveal a hole that was like a giant mouth. She swallowed Sinclair's corpse whole, engulfing even the dagger that was in her chest.

Having consumed the corpse, she then quietly laid down on the same spot without moving an inch. Richard felt numerous lights jumping around within his mindscape where she was, slowly converging to form parallel lines that entered her body.

It would still take some time for the corpse to be completely digested. In the interim, Richard planned to help clean up the battlefield. However, at that exact juncture one of Baron

Fontaine's knights suddenly came over, very anxious as he spoke to Richard, "Sir Richard, the Baron doesn't have much time left. He hopes for you to go over as soon as possible, he has some words for you."

Book 2, Chapter 150

An End And A Beginning(3)

“The Baron won’t make it?” Richard asked in shock. Even though Fontaine’s injuries were serious, he had seen clearly at the time that they weren’t serious enough to be untreatable. Flowsand had healed him in time as well. Of course the wounds would affect his might in the future, but how was it so critical all of a sudden?

Fontaine had been carried out of the battlefield after the battle, brought to the central keep to be treated by an elderly family doctor. By the time Richard got there, the Baron’s bedroom was already filled with people, many being women and children. Fontaine himself was laying in his bed, his face ashy white.

Two old, clearly worn out men were sitting at a sofa in the corner. They were shamans of the Fontaine family, using blessings from their ancestors to heal their patients. They were similar to clerics in their duties, but lagged far behind in terms of power. It was evident that they had used all of their power, but they could do nothing to cure their liege.

Richard swiftly made it to the bedside and sat down, grabbing Fontaine’s hand. His gaze quickly swept over the man’s body, but that only made his heart shrink.

The Baron’s vitality was being consumed not by wounds, but a power of death and decay within. This was obviously an after-effect of Sinclair’s attack; most of the man’s internal organs were already destroyed.

Richard felt his heart tightening, suddenly thinking of Waterflower who had similarly been dealt a heavy wound by Sinclair. He immediately searched his consciousness for the young lady’s presence. Thankfully her soul was still stable, albeit quite weak.

When he saw Richard nearby, Fontaine showed a cheerful smile, “Richard, my friend. We fought side by side in battle, and defeated a mighty foe. It is such a shame that I cannot share one last drink with you...”

“You must hold on,” Richard said encouragingly, but deep down he knew that the Baron would not survive. These wounds were impossible to heal even for a powerful cleric, and Flowsand was drained of all mana during the battle. Only the grace of a god could pull him back from the brink of death, but such grace would only be granted to the god’s followers. Being from a family that worshipped their ancestors, he would never seek a god’s intervention.

Fontaine smiled weakly, “I know I won’t make it. For the sake of... our partnership in tonight’s battle, can you help me take care... of my children?”

Richard followed the man’s finger, seeing four children of different ages. The oldest was fifteen years of age and a level 7 swordsman, his youth having faded quite a bit already. The youngest was only four.

“Alright!” Richard nodded, “What paths would you like them to take in the future?”

Fontaine struggled to prop himself up. The assistant by his side immediately took up pen and paper, knowing that this would be Baron Fontaine’s last will and Richard would be witness and executor.

The Baron’s oldest son would take on his mantle, preserving the family’s traditions. The two youngest would live their lives out in this territory as well. What came as a surprise was the request with respect to his second son. He asked for the fourteen-year-old to give up ancestral worship, following in Flowsand’s footsteps as a member of the clergy.

Richard was astonished by the decision, gazing deep into

Fontaine's eyes in an attempt to find some reasoning behind it. Unfortunately, the man would never get to explain himself. Baron Fontaine's eyes quickly dimmed, the room lapsing into silence.

His wife and children did not cry, a request made known before his death. This was not the time for them to be weak. The Baron had died in the prime of his life, and the impact of this on his family was undoubtedly great. More than half of the family's elites and soldiers had died, while half the rest couldn't fight again. Even if they summoned their reserve troops and other platoons at the earliest, that was only about two or three hundred people. Such a pathetic number of troops would be pathetic even under a normal knight; and the strongest remaining warrior was only level 11.

The haze in the room lingered for a long time, eventually getting up and walking in front of Fontaine's second son. "What is your name?" he asked.

"Caesar, Sir Richard," the teenager replied shyly.

"Now then, Caesar, are you willing to serve a true god? To become his loyal disciple, fulfilling every wish of his in the mortal realm?"

Caesar looked left and right before finally bowing his head, not daring to look Richard in the eye. He spoke softly, "Those are the wishes of my great father, so... I am willing."

The moment these words left his lips, some fierce glares landed on Caesar. The son of a family that worshipped their ancestors producing a cleric was difficult for many people to accept, especially the two elderly shamans. Even though they had heard this from the Baron's own mouth, given their status in the family they could still reject such a wish. The Baron could refute that, but that was only if he was still alive.

Richard raised his hand and waved it slightly, bathing Caesar in a magic glow that calmed his mind. It was a simple spell to calm the spirit, but it also reminded everyone present that Richard was a

mage.

He looked over the boy, speaking seriously, “Caesar, your father had incredible foresight. It is a pity that he could not keep you company for a longer time. Follow me, I’ll bring you to your master. Her name is Flowsand, someone destined to be a high priestess.”

Before he left the room, Richard looked at the Baron’s wife before casting a glance at the young man who had just taken over as Baron. He eventually sighed, speaking to Fontaine’s wife, “Baron Fontaine originally made a deal with me to provide, food, weapons, and supplies for my lands. It was a sign of our friendship, I hope the deal can still be honoured. As long as I remain here, I will be a steadfast partner of the Twilight Castle.”

The woman controlled her sadness, speaking in a clear tone, “We shall fulfill all of the Baron’s wishes from when he was alive. Please rest assured, Sir Richard.”

Richard sighed without saying anything, grabbing Caesar by the hand and leaving the room. He himself was a teenager who was no older than seventeen, a mere three years older than the boy. However, the few months he had spent in Faelor felt like years.

Once he walked out of the main building, the dense stench of blood returned. Faint cries filled the air, the citizens of the castle coming out of hiding to look at the front of the city. Their greatest fear was recognising a familiar face amongst the piles of corpses that were being cleared out from the battlefield.

Richard walked around aimlessly, looking at the fresh life around him. It was now dawn, but the dense clouds still covered more than half the sky. In the hazy morning light, the world seemed to be one of black and white. Everything seemed unreal.

Richard felt a void in his heart. Baron Fontaine’s death had caused him unexpected shock. This was a special feeling, one known as the mourning of a friend.

Book 2, Chapter 151

Spoils Of War

Although the battle had already ended, they still needed to spend some time cleaning up. There was some small conflict with the new Baron's subordinates over the spoils of war, stemming from Richard's request for all the dead bearguard knights.

Of course, the dispute was apparently over the thick, sturdy armour and weaponry. However, the equipment wasn't really Richard's goal. Just like when his team had come over, transferring magic equipment required a huge price. Thus, the bearguard knights' armour was merely tough and nothing more. However, he couldn't make the fact that he needed the corpses more than their equipment known.

Ultimately, this small conflict was resolved by Richard paying the Fontaine Family some gold. He managed to retrieve about 50 runes from the bodies, able to be used again after some slight repairs. This was a huge amount of wealth, and the gold he had paid was nothing in comparison. If not for the conflict, he had originally considered leaving a few runes behind for Fontaine's family, but the increased hostility before the man's body was even cold meant he couldn't arm a potential enemy himself.

This was normal in Faelor; those who worshipped their ancestors and those who worshipped gods were like fire and ice.

Many attempts had told Zendrall that he couldn't convert the bearguard knights into warriors of darkness. The knights had been bred so thoroughly they didn't even have complete souls left. More than being sorry for the loss, this information left Richard even more wary of the Schumpeters. Breeding a being with an incomplete soul was extremely time-consuming, requiring at least several hundred years. The Schumpeters likely had many more secrets than they let on.

Ultimately, the corpses of the knights and their mounts were handed over to the broodmother. Even though she hadn't yet finished digesting Sinclair's body, she still asked for these corpses all the same. By this point, Richard already knew that any creature with formidable power was beneficial for her evolution and growth.

Under Gangdor's command, the strong barbarian warriors had carried the corpses over, throwing them one by one into the broodmother's acidic fog. Nobody could see what was happening within.

By the time the sky was completely bright, the losses had been counted. The combined defense originally had about 1500 people, and now there were less than 400 left. He only had a hundred or so desert warriors and barbarians under him. However, what pained him most was that all the footsoldiers had met their end, and only two of the knights had survived. Over 400 wind wolves had been reduced to 111, more than half of the casualties coming at the manticore's claws.

The battle was a pyrrhic victory. Had their luck been even slightly worse, he would have lost Waterflower or Gangdor. No amount of gains could make up for such a loss.

Once the aftermath had been analysed, Richard realised that he had suffered very serious losses. If he wanted to replenish his strength quickly, he would need to depend on the broodmother evolving.

Once they finished cleaning up the battlefield, Richard allowed all his soldiers to withdraw from Twilight Castle and settle down at the nearby barracks, even bringing out their injured warriors.

Kars shared much of Flowsand's burden; although his healing ability as a fallen cleric was greatly limited he could still use divine scrolls. Flowsand seemingly had a premonition of the tragic battle, and she had stored up a batch of lesser heal scrolls. They may seem

weak, only able to treat minor injuries, but when used on a large group this was much better than slowly recuperating over time. It was a good method to allow the army to retain as much of its strength as possible.

Only the billows of acidic fog continued to linger in the middle of the battlefield, but by the time darkness fell once more the broodmother had contacted Richard again. She had transmitted a large amount of information, requesting that he go over immediately. There were some details regarding a special unit that required his presence.

Richard felt a little strange at that. The broodmother had never asked him such a thing before; whenever it accumulated enough energy he had been allowed to choose the upgrades through their mental link. Even standing right next to the broodmother he still had to communicate through their souls; after all, she could not speak well.

Richard thus put on his clothes, walking over to the broodmother in the middle of the battlefield. He used the short time he had en route to quickly analyse the information he had received, and couldn't help but be astonished.

The manticore, Sinclair, the bearguard knights and their mounts, even Sinclair's dagger that could pierce armour and had destructive energy... It had all contributed greatly to the broodmother's evolution, allowing her to jump directly to level 4. There were now more than ten options for upgrades!

As expected, the manticore's lethal toxicity had been assimilated. Now, all of the drones had an element of poison to their attacks, even long distance ones like bone arrows. Besides that, the broodmother's own acidic properties had been integrated into the drones as well. Even the normally harmless raptors had great combat strength with the toxic acid.

The main use of the bearguard knights had been in giving her the

energy to evolve. Only one ability had been gained from them; his drones could now have their defences enhanced by 20%. It was practical, but not exactly outstanding. Still, it greatly increased his options.

At the same time, a type of combat drone called the thrower had been added. It was a small humanoid, similar to a trogg or dwarf. They were short and nimble, suitable for complex terrain like mountains and forests. They used all types of throwing weapons, their primary ammo being bone throwing axes that grew out of their backs. Although the range was less than a hundred metres, these creatures had more powerful attacks than humans with crossbows, and their attacks could be coated with poison that increased their might severalfold. However, each thrower could only grow one axe everyday, with a maximum three total on their bodies at the time. Once the axe was broken off, it would lose its toxicity in a matter of minutes.

Richard's biggest concern was that these were the first drones in humanoid form, able to use actual weapons. Outside of their own bone axes, they could use all types of throwing axes, spears, and the like; even rocks were no issue, but their power would be greatly reduced.

Once the regiment of throwers reached a large enough scale, their power would be beyond imagination. Richard even thought of several plans on the battlefield that could combine them with long-range magic.

The broodmother herself had gotten a few options as well. Amongst others, he could increase her speed, defence, or the range of her mind flay. However, having experienced the volley of wind blades from the wind wolves Richard decided to strengthen her core-most ability— drone creation.

Of course, it was a must to select the ability to create one additional combat drone every day. Another ability caught Richard's eye as well: an increase of 20% to eating speed, range,

and energy storage. The speed and storage were understandable, but he didn't understand what a 20% increase in eating range meant.

However, the broodmother herself was unclear on what that was. This information had already been stored in the depths of her soul when she was still an egg, so she only gradually learned these things as she grew.

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Spoils of War(2)

In the end, Richard chose the increased drone production as well as the boost to its eating speed, range, and capacity. As long as there was sufficient time and the broodmother was adequately fed, she would grant him an endless supply of soldiers. At the moment there was no rush to strengthen the combat drones; he planned to give his options some serious thought before he came to a conclusion.

The acidic fog in the middle of the battlefield had faded greatly. When Richard approached the broodmother, she breathed in strongly and sucked it all into her majestic body that was like a small hill.

At that moment, standing in front of the broodmother, Richard felt an invisible pressure wrap over him. The creature's small, strange head contrasted starkly with the rest of its shell, one new and the other old. The scars of the battle with the manticore were still all over her body.

Richard raised his head to meet her eyes, asking, "You were so eager to have me come here, what's the matter?"

"It concerns the construction of a special unit, Master," the broodmother replied.

"A special unit?"

"Yes. Building one is a matter of chance, and requires the use of divinity. The demonic assassin you gave me had the power of death; I can use the divinity I absorbed from all those idols to turn her into a special unit. However, the process cannot be seen by anyone, not even Miss Flowsand."

"Not even Flowsand? Why?" Richard was very surprised. Both Flowsand and the broodmother had come from the Church of the

Eternal Dragon; to the best of his understanding, they were on the same side.

“I do not know either, it comes from instinct. Nobody outside of you can know, absolutely nobody!”

“Alright,” Richard nodded, waving his hand to cast a darkness spell that enveloped the two of them, “We can start now.”

The broodmother sent large amounts of information to Richard, giving him three choices for the type of the drone. He could create a humanoid, a beast, or a mount.

Richard didn't need to think the question over, immediately choosing the humanoid. He needed more strong guards by his side.

She then gave him three more choices. He could use all, two-thirds, or a third of the divinity to create this special unit.

The broodmother had completely absorbed the divinity of the idols of fifteen orc tribes in total. The weakest special unit needed five idols' worth; from her information, this was a basic unit of divinity.

Richard quickly familiarised himself with the measurement system, asking a different question, “What's the difference between using all three units of divinity and just one?”

“The battle might, capacity, and special abilities increase with the amount of divinity I pour in. Using a single unit of divinity each will allow you to create three units.”

“Use everything you have,” he decided immediately. Right now, he had no shortage of cannon fodder. His deficiencies were at the top end of the power spectrum; without the broodmother herself and the combined might of 400 wind wolves, he could not have killed the manticore. Even during the battle against Sinclair, although his tactics had been executed near-perfectly they had still lost almost all their resources to pull off a close victory. If the battle had been in the open instead, their chances of victory would

have been slim.

“As you wish,” the broodmother replied, going silent for a brief moment before continuing, “You have a few last choices. You can spawn it with its maximum battle capacity, but in exchange you will lose some of the drone’s potential. If you choose the reverse, the drone’s capacity will be greater in the future but it will be weak as a newborn. Also, you can choose from a few affinities as well. Since the drone will be based on Sinclair, you can choose any of invisibility, sudden attacks, and assassination. The more of these traits you choose, the lower the level and potential.”

This was the toughest choice. Richard pondered over it intensely, using the full extent of his abilities, but it still took a while to come to a decision. Images of Sinclair disappearing in mid-air and reappearing among his troops crossed his mind. The effectiveness of her abilities was still fresh in his mind.

“Maximise the potential,” he eventually said with determination, “and give it all three abilities!”

“Are you sure?” the broodmother started to hesitate. Her own calculations told her that this route would greatly minimise the maximum level of the unit. However, Richard was very certain; his own life had been at stake when he witnessed the horror of Sinclair’s powers. There were many circumstances where such a specialised character like Sinclair gave people more headaches and instilled more fear than balanced fighters.

“Just do it!”

“As you wish, please wait five minutes,” the broodmother replied. Her stomach started to churn violently, and it wasn’t long before a gigantic egg that was larger than the average person was pushed out. The egg started to hum when it hit the floor, and to Richard’s surprise a blade pierced through the walls. A few cuts later, the egg was cut open and a humanoid creature emerged.

This was a strange being, looking like a female human with a

well-proportioned body. There was a layer of armour on the outer body, but this armour covered very little and left large parts of jade-like skin visible. The half of its face that was exposed was extremely allured, but the rest seemed to be covered by a helmet of sorts. The being's eyes looked like crimson crystals. The right hand was long and slim, delicate like a lady's, while the left was a metal blade.

The blade seemed familiar to Richard, and it wasn't long before he realised that it was one of Sinclair's daggers. It had been swallowed by the broodmother when she absorbed the corpse, and she had used it in the construction of this creature. The blade had no sheen to it, but focusing on it would cause one to grow nervous. Richard cast a detection spell and was astonished to find that it still retained all its properties from before. This included the ability to pierce armour, and the power of destruction within. This was nothing short of a miracle.

Richard's gaze returned to the unit's face. The finer details seemed a little lifeless, but the appearance was immensely familiar to him. He had already understood when he looked at the blade; if one didn't look close enough, they might even mistake this drone for Sinclair herself! However, that similarity was only partial. Richard spent a long time looking at it before he realised the true root of the familiarity he felt.

"Broodmother, who did you base the special unit's face on?" Richard asked, and the answer confirmed his suspicions.

"Sinclair, Flowsand, and Waterflower."

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Aftermath

Richard was unsure whether the resemblance to Sinclair and the girls in his party was intentional or there were other reasons. It may have been a coincidence, but judging from the broodmother's answers he had a thought he never had before: perhaps the broodmother had its own mind and soul, and wasn't merely a contract beast that just followed his orders.

The special unit was the same as any other drone. Once born, it picked up its eggshell and devoured it clean. Its outer armour grew slightly harder, thicker, and more glossy. Once done with the task, the unit stood in place without moving.

The broodmother then transmitted a special spell to him called Enlighten. It would activate this special drone, enlivening its nascent soul. It also branded a trace of himself in the soul, ensuring that this being would recognise him as the master and not the broodmother herself.

Newly created as itel was, the special unit's soul was still in slumber. It was very weak and vulnerable, only at the level of its creator. Zendrall and Flowsand were both proficient at their classes, specialising in the spiritual. This made their wills stronger than the broodmother's own, allowing them to enslave this new being. This was why the spawning had to be kept secret.

Richard acted according to the broodmother's guidance, placing his hands on the new unit's forehead and reciting a spell. A tiny spark of his soul was sent into its body, igniting its hidden divinity into a burning soul.

The being's entire body shook, its eyes rapidly gaining life. It first turned its gaze towards the broodmother, "Thank you, creator."

Just as Richard was shocked by the unit's ability to speak, it

turned around and bowed like a noble towards him, “I shall obey your every command, Master.”

“Oh, umm... That... is good.” Richard was left at a loss for words; the events in front of him were far too shocking. Had he not seen this “drone” being created, he would have assumed it was a human or some humanoid sentient being. Even with the broodmother explaining that the presence of a soul was because she had used the power of divinity, even when all of this had happened right in front of his face, he still felt a great sense of amazement.

The scriptures of many churches mentioned that the realm of the soul was the domain of the gods; mere mortals were restricted from meddling in it. This was why humans could not create new, intelligent races: they could not create souls. Only the gods could create sentient races, and even then it was the domain of the few gods that were very powerful.

Richard calmed himself down, but he still felt uneasy as he spoke to the unit, “Wait a second, I need to think of a name for you. Your current clothes aren’t adequate either, I need to get you some new ones to protect your body.”

“My name is Phaser,” the special unit replied.

“Phaser?” Richard was startled once again. He turned and asked the broodmother, “Did you name her?”

“No, Master,” the broodmother replied immediately.

Phaser spoke up, “This name was carved into my soul, arising when you awoke me. However, that is only what you can refer to me as. My real name is ”At the same time, Phaser added, “This name is carved as a symbol in my soul, it came out at the same time as my soul. I can only use it as my name. My truename is Phaser Repersie....”

Phaser went on to recite a very long name that was made of almost a hundred syllables, taking more than ten seconds just to

speaking. Thankfully, Richard's great memory allowed him to memorise it. However, the shock in his heart just grew in magnitude. A truename at birth? Even in the deep abyss, that only held true with the more powerful demons.

He didn't know whether this was a trick of his mind, but when Phaser looked him in the eye he felt like her gaze held complicated emotions behind them. Thinking about it, he felt creeped out...

Richard returned to camp, fetching a hooded cape for Phaser. He also got her a masked scarf that was commonly used by assassins, allowing her to cover the visible portion of her face. Only then did he dare bring her into the castle. This wasn't because Phaser looked strange, but more because her face just looked too much like Sinclair's. His soldiers had just fought a bloody battle, and would have nightmares of the demonic young lady for a long time to come. Exposing them to Phaser's case would definitely not be a good idea.

The common soldiers weren't the least bit interested in this new companion. It was common for nobles to have new ladies by their side, and what's more this one was dressed like an assassin and spent most of her time in the shadows. Anyone who was smart knew better than to disturb her.

Everyone contracted to Richard felt the presence of another soul belonging to the same owner, but with knowledge of Olar and his spike they didn't try to find out more. Richard himself couldn't think of a perfect backstory even after deep thought, so he merely passed it off, saying, "This is a contracted being." Flowsand cast an indifferent glance at her, not asking further.

After a bit of back and forth, Richard handed over all the magic crystals he had gathered to the broodmother as an energy source, increasing her ability to create drones threefold. However, every subsequent upgrade needed more and more energy, leaving him with less than ten crystals. It was only enough for him to make some ordinary runes for Faelor.

Once the upgrade was done, the broodmother could create six wind wolves or three throwers in a day. The throwers were even enhanced with poison, their bone axes able to kill even level 10 knights in a minute if they broke skin. Only strong warriors that were level 12 or above could use their powers to endure it for a while.

Needless to say, the manticore's venom was not that gentle. The broodmother had diluted the power of the poison she granted to the throwers; only someone at level 15 or above would be able to survive the actual poison. And this was merely the might of the replica; a single sting of the manticore itself could even kill a Faelor saint.

Once everything was done, Richard allowed the broodmother to retreat back into the Land of Turmoil; that area could provide enough food for her, and operating in an area full of humans would be too conspicuous anyway. A majority of the wind wolves followed the broodmother back, only forty left by Richard's side. He could only exercise perfect control of thirty units right now, so this was more than enough. When the new wind wolves that were enhanced with poison were created, these old ones would naturally be phased out.

It was only the second day after the battle that the reinforcements started to arrive. The reinforcements had reached at the same time as the original party the Direwolf Duke had sent, led by Lord Moonbear who was one of Bevry's three saints. Moonbear had rushed forth with two hundred elite knights, managing to catch up with the messengers who had set off much earlier.

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Aftermath(2)

Lord Moonbear was about forty years of age. The bristle-bearded was tall and bulky, covered from head to toe in silver heavy armour and with a two-handed axe by his side. Most of his troops were covered in chainmail, giving them a balance between mobility and defence. This elite army was definitely quite powerful.

However, Richard could only sigh at the sight of the Moonbear Lord's reinforcements. If not for his own army being present last night, Twilight Castle would have been massacred by Sinclair. These reinforcements didn't have a single mage amongst their number, only two shamans. If they had to fight Sinclair outside Twilight Castle, even escaping required Lord Moonbear to assess the situation clearly at the start and begin the retreat immediately. However, that instant retreat would only be able to save their strongest and fastest men.

Lord Moonbear and the Duke's messenger met with Richard at the camp, verifying the results of the last night's battle. The traces of the battlefield and piles of corpses caused the arrogant lord to show a dignified expression. He didn't avoid the filth and stench of the corpses, personally looking over the wounds on the corpses. His expression only grew more serious afterwards, any contempt and doubt fading from his gaze.

Richard had kept a few of the bearguard knights and mounts around, the intention being to shock and awe. Even though none of the bodies were intact, one could still see the strength they had when they were alive.

The messenger from the Duke was an old titled knight. He was immaculately dressed, not a speck of dust anywhere on his person, and displayed great etiquette and style in conversation; one could

only call him impeccable. He accompanied Richard on a walk through the barracks, looking through the entire place. The man was extremely talkative, informing Richard of the history and customs of Duke Bevry's lands as they walked, but not once mentioning anything about Richard's origins. He only vaguely spoke about the matter with the rune as well, asking that Richard finish handling the aftermath as soon as possible so he could meet the Duke immediately.

Richard agreed.

In a single day, the attitude of the Fontaine Family had changed greatly. Intentionally or otherwise, they kept hurrying Richard to leave the lands as soon as possible. This was a sign that a power struggle was beginning; Baron Fontaine had died too young, and his successor was still a youth. His personal guard was almost completely wiped out during the battle, so the eldest son didn't have military power at hand. Although there were many witnesses to Baron Fontaine's last will, the decision to let Caesar follow Richard in serving a god made the entire will objectionable.

Richard had read a lot about these kinds of struggles in his books. Any family with over a century's history had a myriad of complicated internal struggles. Although it was an undisputed fact that the title and castle belonged to the eldest son, there were a lot of benefits to be had elsewhere in the family lands. Added up, these benefits were worth no less than Twilight Castle itself.

Richard couldn't stand the disputes in the Fontaine Family, wanting to intervene, but Flowsand had stopped him. This was not the time to interfere; he needed to wait until the meeting with the Duke to take note of the situation.

The envoy stayed for another day before urging Richard to make a move. Lord Moonbear, on the other hand, stayed behind to assist the Fontaines who were currently drained.

Lord Moonbear had asked to see Richard's "giant creature"

sometime during his stay. Richard knew that the lord was talking about the broodmother, but he definitely wouldn't show her to him. He thus evaded the issue by claiming it was a magic summon that required a large price and took a long time. Moonbear was skeptical, but he didn't probe too much.

Two days later, Richard finally arrived at Deepcliff City. This was the largest city in the Direwolf Duke's lands, built on a hillside with his own majestic castle halfway up. The castle was enormous, larger even than the Archerons' ancestral Blackrose Castle.

Deepcliff City was extremely busy, the architecture rough but orderly. It seemed like the place had been planned properly when it was built, many of the taller buildings built with large stones.

The city had a population of over 100,000, with a permanent garrison of around 3,000 knights with thousands more stationed in the surroundings. Counting the other armies spread throughout his lands as well as the soldiers he could conscript from his vassals, Bevry could gather a large army of 30,000 if needed. This already approached the scale of the royal army.

The city walls were over thirty metres tall, making them seem greatly majestic from the distance. Richard stopped at the gate to look up, only finding them even more stunning up close. It took him a few minutes to snap out of it, only following the messenger in after a few minutes. The knight didn't urge him on this time; the man was proud of his city's majesty.

Of course, Richard was looking at it from the perspective of a commander, analysing everything he could see. A 10,000 strong army could hold this city against even five times their number for a considerable time.

Once they entered, Richard noticed the portcullises at the start and end of the entrance were made out of steel arms that were as thick as an arm. The gate was mounted on a track, driven up and down by a capstan. No ordinary siege weapons could break this

gate apart; one could only send powerful soldiers up the walls and have them open up the gate for the rest of the army.

However, the vanguard of any attacking army would undoubtedly be heading to their deaths. Even a powerful saint couldn't guarantee their lives in front of these powerful defences. Without any assistance, they would be attacked from all sides once they scaled the walls. On top of the squeazy battlements, no matter how strong one was they could still suffer a disastrous defeat. That was evident even from Sinclair's fight atop Twilight Castle, and Deepcliff City would only be worse. As one of the three dukes of the Sequoia Kingdom, the Direwolf Duke didn't lack strong subordinates. Moreover, his belligerent nature only ensured that those under him were stronger than the rest.

Most of Richard's army remained in the barracks outside the city; he only brought along a dozen or so bodyguards as he entered the castle.

The hustle and bustle of Deepcliff City attracted Richard's attention. There was a wide road from the gate to the southern plaza, enough for three chariots to pass through side by side. As his own group advanced, the hurried clops of horses rang out coming towards them. Dozens of cavalymen sprinted towards the city gate, shouting loudly along the way to clear the streets of pedestrians and other vehicles. They were all covered in dark grey armour, with the crest of a direwolf on their chests.

Hearing the shouts from the distance, the Duke's messenger had the team move to the side of the road. Dozens of horsemen swept past them towards the city gate, gone like the wind in but a few moments. Not all the pedestrians and carriages along the way had cleared the path—the road at the city's entrance was very crowded and with people of different speeds—but none of these riders had trampled over any of the slow ones. It was a fine display of ability.

Richard looked over at the leaving troop from atop his horse, his eyes narrowing undetectably. Every one of these riders was level 8

at minimum; their control over their horses was one thing, but each one emitted a cold, murderous aura. These weren't rookies without experience.

He opened the window of a carriage wide to give Flowsand a look, and the two exchanged a silent glance. There were no words or movements before he closed the window once more.

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Bargaining Chip

Richard had done his research on Bevry before the meeting, so he knew instantly that the riders who had just passed them were from the Knights of the Direwolf. However, the Knights of the Direwolf were more than a thousand strong. If the weakest of them were level 8, this was a terrifying force that was more than a match for his own army.

With superior equipment, comprehensive training, and a capable general in charge, a group of elites could easily wipe out an entire army on the battlefield even if their opponents were of similar level to them. The mere group of ten knights that had passed caused Richard to feel more pressure than a hundred horse bandits.

Looking at each other, both he and Flowsand had a common line of thought. Only after looking at the majesty of Deepcliff City could they figure out the might they needed to conquer Faelor. In fact, the two of them had already made some analyses; if they wanted to conquer the entire plane, they would need the full strength of one of the three human empires from Norland! After all, Faelor was only a few levels below Norland and there was minimal difference in area.

This plane was like a humongous mountain of cheese, but his own might here was less than an ant's. Careless greed would cause him to suffer, maybe even die under this mountain's pressure.

The Duke's messenger brought Richard to a small inn at the southern plaza, quickly scurrying back to the castle to arrange a meeting. The old knight repeatedly warned Richard to stay in the city before he left, awaiting news of the appointment. Duke Bevry would likely fix an appointment with him the very next day.

When night fell, Richard entered Flowsand's room to find her

healing Waterflower. The young lady had sustained life-threatening injuries in the battle with Sinclair, only saved because of the cleric's best efforts. Even though the injuries seemed to be healed on the surface, Waterflower's internals were still damaged. She needed Flowsand to regularly cast Rejuvenation on her to speed up the recovery.

Once the spell was cast, traces of weariness appeared on Flowsand's face. She sent Waterflower out and sat by the desk, opening a mana recovery potion and slowly drinking it. Such potions aided clerics as well, although they were less effective than they were for mages. Without a shrine to the Eternal Dragon being present on Faelor, Flowsand was left with no choice but to waste her potions.

Richard sat beside her, inspecting her face carefully as he examined her aura. His face suddenly warped, "Was your mana pool damaged?"

Flowsand grunted in agreement, speaking indifferently, "It's alright, this is the price I had to pay to force my level up. It's a good thing that the damage isn't too great. I didn't lose a level; this is the best I could have hoped for."

Richard sighed, but he did not know how to console her. If she hadn't forcibly used the Lens of Time to slow Sinclair down, all of them would have perished at the hands of that demonic lady. However, the consequences of that decision were beginning to reveal themselves. Even though her mana pool would continue to increase as she levelled, what was lost would not come back.

Flowsand smiled at Richard's concern, holding his hand in hers as she spoke gently, "This is the price I had to pay. The decision was already made, so there is no need to dwell on it. I know why you are here; you want to discuss how we hook the Duke when we meet him tomorrow, no?"

Richard nodded with a frown, "Looking at Deepcliff City and the

Knights of the Direwolf, I'm afraid our old ideas won't work. The Duke became a saint long ago, and he has political power as well. Individual power might not be as important to him as we expected. He needs a number of powerful elites serving him; he himself won't have many chances to show his prowess. Neither runes nor magic equipment increase one's intrinsic power, so a watered-down rune isn't of much importance to him. If someone like the Church of Valour is prepared to offer him a divine or even half-divine weapon like the Axe of Valour, then it would be much more useful than any rune I can make. Unless, of course, I'm willing to tailor-craft a rune set for him."

"If you really want to do so, don't expect him to go easy on you," Flowsand said with a faint laugh.

Richard sighed helplessly, "Yes, I think so too. However, Bevry knows that there are some problems with our background. The gods of this plane are very generous when it comes to destroying invaders of other planes."

Flowsand smiled sweetly and said, "Any god in any plane is the same. In fact, the gods of Faelor are actually quite slow to react. This plane has probably seen large armies from primary planes before."

"Whatever it is, I'm worried the Duke will give us to the church as gifts."

"That is not impossible." Flowsand held her head in hand, falling into thought for a while before she spoke up once more, "It seems like we need to find something more attractive than a boost to his strength."

"Something more important than strength...." Richard muttered. His eyes suddenly lit up, "That's it! The most important thing to a powerhouse is their lifespan. Isn't the very reason the Eternal Dragon is revered over the other gods that he is the only one that can grace someone with time?"

Flowsand saw Richard's intentions, and her own eyes started sparkling as well. She spoke quickly, "Yes! How could I have forgotten this? I have the Book of Time. Even though I can't make a sacrifice through it to give anyone an extended lifespan, I can still fool Bevry into thinking I can prolong his life! This might actually work..."

Richard suddenly remembered that there was another deity of time in this plane, "Oh right, what about Runai? Doesn't he control the same domain as the Eternal Dragon?"

Flowsand laughed mildly, "Runai wouldn't even be a greater deity on a primary plane, how could he call himself the God of Time? I paid attention to him and his teachings; his powers can only warp the speed of time. It's a mere distortion, and the warped time eventually returns to normal. If you step in and out of its field of influence, you won't discover any changes.

"Also, I didn't find any records of a significant prolonging of one's life in this plane. If Runai was a true God of Time, an extension to one's life would be a blessing granted to the core of his church, given to worshippers who made great contributions to him."

After a slight pause, Flowsand continued, "Most importantly, the power of time transcends that of the planes. Ant deities who control time are beyond their very planes. So there can't be a God of Time that is restricted to this plane."

This was information Richard was not aware of; it was also one of the true mysteries in the myriad planes.

Flowsand gazed into Richard's face, a faint golden glow in the depths of her eyes, "Besides, your life force still contains the divine grace of the Eternal Dragon. That should be proof enough that the Eternal Dragon's will is above that of this plane's gods. This Runai is not something we need to worry about."

Richard shook his head, "Not necessarily. If Runai finds out

about you, he will be the one god that wants to kill us the most. He will enter a frenzy that knows no bounds.”

Book 2, Chapter 156

Bargaining Chip(2)

When Flowsand heard Richard's words, her expression grew heavy. If the Church of the Eternal Dragon really did begin to spread through Faelor, Runai would be the one deity that was hurt the most. The very foundation of his faith would be destroyed. The Eternal Dragon did not need faith, but someone like Runai was born of belief. If the foundations of his faith were shaken, he would drop to becoming a lesser god, perhaps even falling entirely.

Richard thought it over a moment, but the dark cloud hanging over his mind seemed to part slowly, "Alright, let's not worry about that for now. Bevry's family worships his ancestors, and he's diametrically opposed to the churches. If we give him hope of an extended life, he'll definitely keep things secret and prevent the followers of Runai from destroying us. Besides, the churches are incredibly weak in the Sequoia Kingdom anyway. Our first goal should be to have the Duke believe we can extend his lifespan!"

Flowsand nodded before shooing Richard out of the room, flipping the Book of Time open as she started to ponder their problem.

As someone grew in power, their lifespan would only increase. Most people had a relatively long lifespan past level 18, upto 150 years or so. When they reached the legendary realm, this lifespan would extend once more depending on their class and power. Legendary powerhouses lasted a minimum of two to three hundred years, the oldest getting to over a thousand years of age. A longer life was the goal of almost every powerhouse; this was also the reason for the Eternal Dragon being revered more than any other god.

Beyond an extended lifespan was immortality, the ultimate dream of everyone in existence.

.....

Early morning the next day. Richard had just finished breakfast when he received news of an appointment with Duke Bevry. He was to immediately follow the envoy towards Deepcliff Castle, which clearly showed how anxious the Duke was.

This caused Richard to relax. He fixed himself up meticulously, before carefully unsealing an enchanted box under the envoy's watch. It took an entire half hour, the rites were tedious and complicated, but the envoy didn't urge him on or otherwise display any sign of impatience.

Before the box was completely unsealed, Richard pointed at it and said to the envoy, "This is a must if we want to retain the rune's power. It will gradually lose power once it's opened, so I could only open it just before I met the Duke. We couldn't have His Grace wait that long, could we?"

The envoy completely believed Richard's words. Even though he was only a titled knight, he came from the famous Nottling Family and had spent decades amongst the upper class. His experience gave him a sharp eye, discerning enough to tell with one look that the enchanted box in Richard's hand would cost 3000 gold to even make. The final price of a magic item was often tenfold its original cost, and such an expensive item was used merely to hold this so-called rune. Even if Richard was a swindler, he would have had to invest far too much into it.

But that point was moot. Richard was a great mage, what need did he have to swindle others? He only needed to express some interest, and any Duke would open their doors wide open to welcome such a young great mage by their side. Money was nothing in the face of a future grand mage.

Only once he'd made enough of a show did Richard let Olar pick up the enchanted box, taking Flowsand along with the entourage to make his way to the Duke's castle.

It was in Bevry's favourite lobby that Richard finally met this man who could be considered one of the true powers of Faelor: the Direwolf Duke. Duke Bevry was 46 years old, in both his physical and mental prime. The man was of lanky build, but a broad frame made him seem formidable. His noble robes weren't too ornate, with a single jade ring on his left ring finger glistening like a clear spring.

Bevry had a short, neatly trimmed beard, and a brilliant light shone from the depths of his long, narrow eyes. There weren't any indications of his strength save for his dignified aura, one that came from having possessed high status for a long time. There was no sense of oppression from his aura; a clear indication of his exquisite control over his own power. On the contrary, a single look from him left Richard feeling like he was seen through from head to toe; he couldn't help but feel deeply alarmed.

The abilities of hiding one's aura and seeing the power of others were secret techniques that were incredibly useful. In Norland alone, there were almost a hundred different methods for each, passed down through various factions. However, Bevry had completely hidden his strength and could see through Richard with a single glance. Even in Norland, this would be first class.

Richard had lost all contempt for Faelor long ago. The deeper he explored, the more he interacted with the societies and powerhouses of this plane, and especially with this meeting, he was starting to respect it.

After all, this was a plane that housed true legendary beings. If not for his runecrafting, he himself would only be a dazzling genius here. The word genius only indicated that one had a higher chance of becoming a true powerhouse than the rest. It wasn't a guaranteed promise of that power. All powerhouses were geniuses, but not all geniuses would become powerhouses.

Duke Bevry smiled after that single glance, "A level 11 great mage, and such a young one at that! That isn't a common sight anywhere

in the continent! I hear you're not even 20, Mr. Richard?" Although Richard was considered his vassal, the Duke still added a customary honorific as respect for his achievements as a mage.

"I turned twenty only a few days ago," Richard answered. He was really only seventeen this year, but there was no need to give the Duke even more surprises. Even a 20-year-old great mage was a rare genius in Faelor's history.

"That is still very rare!" The duke settled down on the main sofa, gesturing for Richard to have a seat as well. He then instructed the maids to serve some black tea.

Once the tea was served, the Duke waved the maids and servants away. That left himself, Richard, Flowsand, Olar, and the fallen cleric Kars remaining in the lobby. Richard noted that the Duke didn't have a single trusted aide by his side.

Although Kars was himself from a prominent family in the Iron Triangle Empire, being so close to the Direwolf Duke left him nervous. However, he could not be blamed for that; power and noble status were closely intertwined on this plane. Dukes of the Sequoia Kingdom and the Iron Triangle Empire were quite close in terms of power, meaning Bevry would be an important character even in his homeland. This was a far cry from his own status.

Richard took the enchanted box from Olar's hands, placing it on the tea table as he said, "This is the rune I crafted for you, Your Grace."

The Duke lifted the lid, only glancing within before he set the box aside. He smiled warmly at Richard, "Very rare and valuable indeed. However, it still cannot compare to a divine weapon. Now, how are you going to convince me not to hand you over to a church? Cerces and Neian have always been generous deities."

Although his tone was as casual as in a conversation about great weather, the content within his words was extremely aggressive.

Book 2, Chapter 157

Gods And Planes

The room went dead in an instant. The only sound to be heard was the breathing of Olar and Kars, something that seemed especially heavy and fast.

Richard leaned into his sofa, staying relaxed, “If they could give you what you wanted, I wouldn’t be sitting here.”

Duke Bevry chuckled, “You have courage, but too much of that is just foolishness. If even Ceres and Neian can’t give me what I want, how could you? If all you have are runes, we have nothing to talk about. A boost to my power is very attractive, but it isn’t enough.” The Duke remained gentle and approachable, but his smile started to grow sharper.

Richard remained unruffled under the pressure, “Of course it’s impossible on my own, but I have my family behind me, a true legendary powerhouse, an entire plane, and a true god who transcends planes themselves! That’s the very reason I can sit in front of you right now.”

“A god?” the Duke broke into laughter, gently stroking the ring on his finger, “You know my family worships our ancestors, completely incompatible with the gods. If you could somehow change my beliefs, why would I have waited so long? You brats are from a different plane, I could have handed you over to a church long ago.”

The atmosphere grew a little stale once more. Marvin, who had been pulling the strings in the Sequoia Kingdom, certainly wouldn’t admit that his lord was an intruder. However, with Baron Forza’s lands being so close, Richard’s abnormal movements couldn’t be hidden from Bevry’s sight. Despite all that, this was the first time the man had clearly mentioned a different plane.

Richard continued to stay calm, as if he was engaged in a rigorous academic debate, “The faith of descendants allows an ancestor to absorb their offerings. The ultimate goal is still to allow your ancestors’ souls to become demigods, giving your family the option to borrow the power of your bloodline for a breakthrough when needed. This is only incompatible with the pantheon because it splits up faith, something they need as well.”

The Duke grew interested, “You know all this, but you still dare mention a god. Are you saying your god does not need my faith?”

“Indeed!” Richard replied.

The Direwolf Duke was a little surprised, but he didn’t question this reply which seemingly violated the rules of the plane. He instead nodded, showing greater interest as he glanced at Flowsand, “So that girl is a cleric? Level 10 at such a young age, the god really has to be powerful. She has a promising future; if she was in Neian’s church, she would have a chance to become pope.

“Richard, it seems like the plane you come from is indeed remarkable. However, what’s the point of bringing this little girl to Faelor? This plane has a long history, and the gods have sealed it off from the outside. The heretic gods... Forgive my discourtesy... No foreign god can extend their might here. When the power stored in this little girl is used up, she’ll become useless. Her only use here is to show me the power of your god.”

“Your words are only half correct, Your Grace. Flowsand is indeed here to show you the power of the great Dragon of Eternity and Light, but even in Faelor she can restore her mana and advance as normal.”

“Oh... She can restore powers... Wait!” The Direwolf Duke’s expression suddenly changed. As the leader of a family of ancestor worshippers whose history was longer even than some powerful royal families, he understood very clearly what it meant for Flowsand to be able to restore her mana. It meant that the god she

served was so powerful he could break through the seal on Faelor!

This god was formidable! Either he was strong enough to suppress the gods of Faelor, or the laws he controlled were beyond Faelor itself. No matter what that was, it wasn't good for any life on Faelor. Richard's arrival implied that this great god had turned his attention to them.

Bevry had almost stood up in his momentary surprised, but his rear had only just left the sofa before he sat down once more. The shock on his face slowly faded away.

His gaze grew extremely sharp, and he scanned over Flowsand and Richard repeatedly. However, Flowsand was a titled cleric while Richard had a legendary master. In the Deepblue, someone of Bevry's level wasn't even worth fighting. The Duke's intent gaze and the pressure he subconsciously gave off didn't cause them to grow timid in the slightest.

"Forgive my discourtesy, but how can you prove what you've said?"

Truthfully, this was quite easy to prove. As long as Flowsand performed a few powerful spells and dried up her mana, she could wait a few days and show that her mana pool had been restored. However, this matter was far too important; Duke Bevry would not have the necessary patience for that.

Thankfully, that was well within Richard's expectations. Richard turned back to Kars, "Kars, go to the Duke and let him have a good look. Hmm, you can cast a few spells while you're at it."

Kars responded and got up, walking to the centre of the lobby before he cast a healing spell on the Duke.

Bevry grew a little doubtful. Healing spells were basics that every cleric possessed, but despite Kars' low level the result was confusing. The spell was only half as effective as the Duke had expected. However, another close look at Kars left the man

shocked.

He had just realised that Kars was a fallen cleric!

Having observed Richard for so long, the Duke had to admit that it had grown hard to differentiate him and the other intruders from the residents of the plane. It would be normal to assimilate some of the locals over such a long time, but the appearance of a fallen cleric was something else entirely. A fallen cleric could only be formed by the power of a god. Kars was level 7, but Flowsand was only level 10. Even if she had emptied her entire mana pool into him, it would have been impossible for the now-fallen cleric to reach his current state. His presence alone was enough to prove conclusively that this god's power could extend into Faelor.

Soon after, Kars took out a pot of a flowering plant called the Queen of the Night. This was a common plant on Faelor, the specialty being that the flower bloomed for less than a minute before withering. There was only a bud on the plant right now, but Richard took out a bottle of magical solution and poured it over causing the flower to slowly blossom. This kind of magic solution that could promote plant growth was quite common even on Faelor.

By the time Richard began pouring the solution, Kars was almost done with his chant. The spell was long and tedious, taking half a minute to finish. When the Queen of the Night just bloomed, his spell fell on the sparkling white flower. Even as everybody held their breaths, the plant stayed blossomed for three whole minutes before withering.

The Duke suddenly stood up!

The power that had fallen on the plant was not something that promoted growth, nor was it a mere stimulus. It was the power of time! This was a power of time that was completely different from that of the God of Time, Runai! It was boundless; although incomparably weak, the Duke perceived that it surpassed Faelor

itself! Even with his best efforts, Bevry could only touch a small drop in that ocean of power. The vast majesty of it all rendered him speechless!

Book 2, Chapter 158

Gods And Planes(2)

The Duke subconsciously stretched his arm out, wanting to take the Queen of the Night and inspect it closely. However, he froze mid-action for a moment before slowly retracting his arm. He knew he had forgotten himself; the eyes were worth nothing when gauging the power of the divine. Everything could be an illusion, the only reliable thing was his perception. Bevry did not think any of these children could cheat him, not even that level 11 mage.

It was only then that he remembered what Richard had said just before, speaking extremely seriously, “You said this god is called the Dragon of Eternity and Light?”

The slight tremble in the man’s voice went unnoticed. If nothing else, the Eternal Dragon’s full title was simply too shocking; some careful consideration would lead one to an unbelievable conclusion!

There was a limit to every life. Even legendary powerhouses died one day, and the gods themselves were not immune to death. They lit their godfires and grew, attempting to grow in power and rank, building larger divine kingdoms. But then they declined, falling as they got replaced by new gods.

Some gods lasted to the end of their planes, but even planes were eventually destroyed. Sometimes this destruction was so fast every creature upon it felt the moment, while other times it was so slow that it felt like an eternity. When the plane perished, the gods would follow it to their end.

A god’s title wasn’t carelessly given. Most times their domain was decided when they ignited their godfire; once their transcendence was complete they would know their title and inform their followers of it. The only reason Runai could claim to be the God of Time was that no other deity on Faelor had a similar domain.

Bevry had met the priests of Runai before, and he understood the scope of his power. This feeling from the Dragon of Eternity and Light completely changed his mind on her greatness, making him think his reputation was exaggerated. Runai's powers could distort the flow of time, but it was only temporary. Once the effects ended, the affected region would return to normal. It was like a dam blocking the flow of a river; once the floodgates were opened, the built-up water would rush out like a torrent. The Eternal Dragon was different. His power changed the fundamental laws of time. It was nothing like building a dam on a river, more akin to widening a stream.

“Dragon of Eternity and Light, Dragon of Eternity and Light.....” The Duke repeatedly chewed over this name he had never heard before, spacing out for a while. The word Eternity had shocked him greatly.

Richard sat quietly, sipping on the top-grade black tea. The only thing in his eyes seemed to be the swirling beverage in his cup.

A god controlling time itself who didn't even need the faith of his followers... This dragon truly had to be above the planes themselves. That was the only reason he wouldn't need belief.

“If...” Bevry calmed down quickly, “If this Dragon of Eternity and Light has the same domain as his name, then does his grace have the power to prolong one's life?”

This was exactly what Richard was waiting for. He raised his head to meet the Duke's clairvoyant gaze, speaking as indifferently as possible, “Indeed. That is the highest level of the Eternal Dragon's grace.”

The Duke nodded, inquiring further, “Then how does one attain the grace of the Eternal Dragon?”

This was a key moment. Richard had prepared a reasoned answer for it long ago, “Firstly, you need to show some basic respect to him. Prepare an offering, and give it over through a sacrificial

altar. The blessing you receive depends on what you sacrifice.”

“Similar to the offerings we make to our ancestors. What kind of sacrifice should we make? Livestock? Magical beasts? Slaves?”

“Any item of incredible power... and living beings. Anything unique is likely to pique the Dragon’s interest.” Richard had used the term ‘living’ after careful deliberation, but it didn’t paint the whole picture. He believed the sacrifice of someone like Runai would grant one thousands of years of life. If someone had talent and luck, that would be enough to light their own godfire.

Bevry laughed as Richard completed his explanation, “In that case, sacrificing someone like the Goddess of Time will give me thousands of years?”

Now it was Richard’s turn to be shocked. He stared at this Duke who talked about killing gods as if it was nothing, casting a glance at Flowsand before answering, “That is correct.”

The Duke smiled, asking another crucial question, “Since a sacrifice must be made, then an altar must be incredibly important. You didn’t bring an altar from your plane, did you?”

“Indeed. We need to build a new altar,” Richard admitted. This was his main objective.

Bevry pondered over it for a moment, “I suppose we could say it was an altar for ancestor worship. However, if sacrifices are so important to the Dragon of Eternity and Light aren’t there any special requirements to build the altar?”

Richard turned to Flowsand, and she nodded her head in answer, “We need to form a stable connection to the Eternal Dragon that can deliver sacrifices. The altar needs tremendous power. Most of that power will be evoked from the first sacrifice, so the offering must be great. The construction of the altar itself also needs a lot of magical materials. I can provide a detailed list, but I don’t know if this plane has enough of the required materials.”

“Sounds doable...” the Duke ruminated, his tall, straight brows locking together. This was clearly an important decision, one that would be difficult to make.

Richard remained calm on the surface, but in his heart, he couldn't help but begin to feel nervous. The Duke had reacted differently than he had expected. It seemed like the man wasn't very keen on obtaining a longer life, but that was the anchor of this plan. If the Direwolf Duke was not interested in immortality, then this entire meeting had become a trap. The only thing that granted him some sense of security was that it would be nigh impossible to fake belief. If the Duke wanted the grace of the Eternal Dragon, his help needed to be sincere.

The tea in his cup had long since been drained, but he was still subconsciously swirling it. Time slowed to a crawl' at some point this pleasant lobby had grown hot and stuffy, causing sweat to bead on his body. His clothes started to grow uncomfortably sticky.

After what seemed like an eternity, the Duke finally put down his own teacup that seemed to have been worn thin. “Richard,” he said with a smile, “You're basically having me betray the entire plane.”

Book 2, Chapter 159

Gods And Planes(3)

The Duke's question only brought calm to Richard's heart— he was completely prepared for it. He placed his teacup down with a smile, "You're only betraying the pantheon, not Faelor itself."

This answer greatly surprised the Direwolf Duke. Even though he worshipped his ancestors, something that went against the gods, he was still essentially on the same track. The ultimate goal of worshipping one's ancestors was to allow their spirits to transcend mortality, becoming deities themselves. When someone in the family ignited their godfire, this worship would naturally transform into the worship of a god. Thus, even Bevry held the gods in high esteem. He was just unwilling to put aside his dignity and interests for a god who was not related to him by blood.

The gods were above everything— everyone in Faelor understood it. It was the same belief held by primitive gods who had not figured out the myriad planes.

"The gods you speak of," Richard responded to Bevry's puzzled gaze, "are merely powerhouses who have aligned themselves with a law. These laws depend on the plane they reside on, and these fellows who take control of them through the faith of mortals can only be called parasites. They are no different from the majority of humans, mere attachments to the plane. How could they possibly be above the plane itself?

"The only reason the gods claim to be above Faelor is that it supports their own agenda. If Faelor is destroyed, these parasites who feed off it will die as well, but even if the gods are destroyed Faelor will continue to exist!"

The Duke was an experienced, knowledgeable man. As an ambitious leader of his family, the profundity of his knowledge would astonish most people. However, he had never thought of

things from the viewpoint Richard just demonstrated.

In a land ruled by the gods like Faelor, any public heresy would end with one burnt at the stake. The Direwolf Duke was at odds with the pantheon, but on the whole it was just internal strife in the same camp. Bevry himself placed the pantheon in high regard, even higher than Faelor itself. However, some consideration led him to understand the irrefutable value behind Richard's words.

And yet, there was an easy method to deal with such irrefutable facts in the teachings of the gods: whether Richard's words were true or not, he would still be burnt. There would be no other reply, no chance for him to hold a debate.

Bevry lightly knocked on the table for a while before finally raising his head, "Whatever I choose, this is an extremely difficult decision. I would like to add a small weight to the balance. Come, follow me; there is someone I want you to meet."

Kars and Olar were left behind in the lobby, with only Richard and Flowsand following the Duke. Bevry brought them along a maze-like path, guards popping out from hidden alcoves everywhere to greet him with a bow.

Deepcliff Castle was Bevry's permanent residence, but the interior wasn't cosy at all. In fact, it was full of fortifications. A single, isolated courtyard in the upper levels contained a five-storey building that housed the Duke's entire family.

Normally, Bevry's kin would rather visit the beautiful countryside than spend their days cooped up in this cramped castle. Only the Duke himself spent most of his time here, occasionally heading out to the mountains to hunt with his family or attend important events. The layout of this castle allowed Richard to peek into a corner of the Duke's heart. This was a wise man, courageous and firm of will...

Opening a dark door, Bevry walked into a dark, moist passageway. This hidden path was long and narrow; it felt like a

gentle downward slope, the walls growing damper the further they went. Richard silently computed his bearings, discovering that this passage actually led to the belly of the mountain this castle was built on. However, he didn't feel particularly threatened; the Duke had no need to wait so long to kill them. He had no way of putting up a fight if that was the man's wish.

The passageway finally opened into another heavy metal door, revealing a vast space behind. This was a courtyard constructed in the interior of the mountain, several rooms illuminated by magic light reflected in the waters of an underground spring.

Bevry was extremely familiar with this place, opening each door along the journey and showing the two what lay within. A majority of the rooms had countless scrolls, books, and other papers randomly scattered about. There was an endless amount of data and pictures everywhere; all familiar to Richard but supposed to be highly abstract knowledge on Faelor. Some of them were theories that still needed proving, but at his level it was all common knowledge.

Magical mathematics was one of the basic foundations of runecrafting. In a plane like Faelor where runecrafting was yet to be discovered, this foundational field wasn't well developed either.

Richard picked up a piece of paper and was astonished by what he saw. This paper had some illustrations with basic planar geometry. The biggest use of planar geometry was in the construction of portals to other planes! Even in Deepblue this was a profound subject, abstruse and difficult because one had to understand the workings of time.

A breakthrough in planar geometry in this backwater... Even if it was simple guesswork, whoever had come up with it was a rare genius. This was just like when he had read Essien's diary, far beyond the means of Faelor.

However, careful thought reminded him that this wasn't strange.

This plane was large, developed and prosperous. There were hundreds of millions of residents here, so there were bound to be geniuses among the rest.

It wasn't long before Duke Bevry opened the last door, the one that was the deepest in. This was a room that was a few hundred square metres in area, the walls filled with bookshelves with a large desk in the centre of the room. A magical light was shining down from the ceiling, making the entire room glow splendidly.

A white-haired old man was sitting at the desk, scribbling non-stop. He was making calculations after calculations, evidently thinking of something.

He didn't even raise his head in response to the noise from the door, "Is it mealtime already? Alright, just set the table in the next room."

"Perrin, I wanted to introduce you to two new friends." The Duke's voice was expectedly calm and friendly, showing true sincerity.

Perrin turned around, glancing over both Richard and Flowsand. He then returned his gaze to the paper in front of him, speaking impatiently, "Alright, I saw them. You can all leave now. You know how precious my time is, Your Grace. If there is no special reason, please don't disturb me. I'm at the brink of a breakthrough, this is a crucial moment!"

Book 2, Chapter 160

Territory

When Perrin turned around, Richard was surprised to realise that the man had an extremely youthful face. This was definitely a young man, definitely no older than thirty. However, his white hair and hunched back made him look no different from a sixty-year-old man from behind. And yet, when he saw the fellow's back again, he sensed that the fellow's aura was truly old. This caused him to turn to Flowsand, who nodded slightly to confirm his conjecture. Perrin's body truly was aged, but he had a young soul!

Perrin gave off the aura of a weak mage, somewhere around level 6 or 7.

The Duke gently closed the door behind them, bringing Richard and Flowsand to a nearby lounge. He personally brewed a pot of rich black tea, speaking bitterly, "Perrin is my third son..."

Richard was slightly shocked. Duke Bevry was only 46 years old, Perrin was in his early thirties at best!

The Duke paused for quite a while, seemingly finding it tough to choose his words, "Perrin... His mother was the greatest love of my life, but she passed away due to a difficult childbirth. Even when he was young, the boy had talent beyond comparison. He wasn't a one in a million genius, no, he was far beyond that! He was the kind of genius you never see in your entire life! Everything you saw was solely his research. He says it is the path to the final mystery of magic arrays, and that he already found the key to that great door."

Richard appeared very calm on the outside, but he was actually shocked further. Faelor and Norland had similar systems of magic, just that Faelor was a step behind. The ultimate mystery of magic arrays... Whatever it would be called, the final result was runes!

“Perrin is only twenty,” Bevry said calmly.

“Is it a curse?” Flowsand probed.

“Yes. I suspect it was a curse from the God of Time. When he was fifteen, Perrin publicly announced some opinions regarding Faelor’s origin. He thinks the plane’s power system is not perfect, so Faelor itself cannot be considered the perfect, flawless, and supreme plane the gods claim it is. There has to be a plane out there whose power system far surpasses ours, but we call them all primitive and barbaric. He also theorised that the gods of Faelor are not the strongest; somewhere in the myriad planes, there is likely a formidable god who exceeds them.”

Indeed, this Perrin was just like Essien. It was an extremely bold conjecture that displayed his sheer genius; at the tender age of fifteen, the boy had taken a step closer to the truth!

Richard fell silent. He knew from history that anyone who was a step ahead of their time would become a great person, but someone who was two steps ahead would just be a sacrifice. Perrin’s statements regarding the power of Faelor’s gods was basically blasphemy.

The Duke’s voice grew bitter, “Not long after his opinions shocked the kingdom, Perrin suddenly started to age ten times faster than normal. Five years later, he just grew to be 20 but his body is already that of a 70-year-old man. Many people whisper that it is because of his treacherous words. The gods were angered, and thus they punished him.

“Ever since the incident, he started to fear the sun and the winds. Only deep within this mountain, where our ancestors’ powers and magic formations protect him, can he avoid the torment of his curse. His only wish now is to complete a foundation for magical mathematics before the reaper knocks on his door.”

“This is that weight?” Richard asked ambiguously.

“Yes. Perrin... I owe his mother too much, and I owe him too much as well.”

Richard turned to Flowsand and asked, “Is there a way?”

Flowsand nodded, “This is a powerful ageing curse, most likely put down by Runai himself. This curse doesn’t affect the flow of time, instead catalysing his body itself. Yes, this is likely a divine punishment.

“Of course, the curse of a god is beyond me. I’m not yet powerful enough to lift this curse directly. However, as long as the altar is built and a sacrifice is successfully made to the Eternal Dragon, the Dragon’s grace can lift this curse. However, the damage has already been done. Perrin will need a much stronger blessing to restore his body as well.”

Flowsand quickly explained how such a blessing would work, finally concluding, “The altar and an offering will be key to saving Perrin.”

For the first time since their meeting, the Duke’s eyes started to glow. He’d been trying his best in the past five years. Outside of pleading for mercy from the gods, he had already looked through countless methods. He went through endless ancient records, sending envoys to distant countries to search for legendary herbs, magical beasts, materials... Anything that could prolong one’s life.

And now, for the first time, he felt that there was hope.

He carefully enquired about the grade of the required offerings. When informed that a blessing of time required a powerful demon or devil at the least, his face contorted a bit. However, the expression of difficulty was soon replaced by determination and resolution.

Greater demons and devils all surpassed the power of Norland’s saints. The more powerful ones even approached level 20. This was a powerful enemy for the Direwolf Duke to provoke, but he would

not hesitate.

“Where will the altar be built?” the Duke asked.

“My territory,” Richard replied quickly. He had already considered this question, “That way, it will be easier to keep it secret.”

“Alright! I will try my best to support you. What do you need? Supplies? Gold? Troops?” This was clearly a display of support.

Richard pondered over it for a moment. He could not ask for a lot — for now, all they had was a preliminary agreement. Their relationship was very fragile, and excessive requests could break it apart.

“Thank you for your kindness, Your Grace. I do indeed need help now, and it’s mainly in three areas. First, I need a steady transaction channel for food, weapons, slaves, and materials. Next, I need a list of names; I need to know your true allies, as well as the powerhouses I need to be wary of. That includes legendary beings as well, and the more detailed the better. Last, and most important, is a large number of materials to build the altar with. I will pay for the supplies, but I need a guarantee that you will supply them to us.”

The Duke cast a deep glance at Richard, speaking with a faint smile, “You’re not asking for money or troops, eh. You’re a very ambitious brat!”

Richard was slightly frightened in his heart, but his face remained stoic.

Book 2, Chapter 161

Territory(2)

Bevry picked up a pen and pointed to a nearby map, outlining a small area. “I’ve already given you the rank of frontier knight. You know this is a permit for you to campaign against others under my name, but a frontier knight is not a true noble. For future convenience, I’m also making you a titled knight. The family you claim to succeed has good pedigree already, so you can be considered a true member of nobility. As for any higher ranks, you’ll have to fight for them. This is the breadth of your land; take a look, see if there’s anything to supplement.”

Richard moved towards the map, closely inspecting the area the Duke had outlined. The land was a few kilometres in circumference, including what was originally Bran Village. It covered a junction of three areas: the Sequoia Kingdom, the Land of Turmoil, and the Bloodstained Lands. A third of the place was mountainous, with a small river flowing through the centre allowing for farmland on either side.

What concerned Richard more was that the road leading towards the interior of the kingdom passed by the edge of the territory, and there were marks for iron, copper, coal, and sequoia trees in the mountains. Although the area hadn’t been completely developed or even explored yet, this place was rich in minerals. Nobody knew just how vast the underground reserves were.

Richard had learnt a lot about minerals in the Deepblue; he knew that the depths of even ordinary mines had a chance to contain rare materials. There was a hope for these lodes to be the same. As for the sequoia trees, they were the namesake specialty of the Kingdom. They were tough and hard, able to conduct magic well. They were used to make magic bows, weapons, and the like.

If these lands were developed well, they would be no worse than

Baron Fontaine's territory.

"Thank you for your kindness!" Richard said.

The Direwolf Duke waved his large hand, "It's a small matter. I hope you can start quickly, establishing a proper business. Time is of the essence!"

He had clearly emphasised the last sentence, and Richard understood what that meant. Perrin was now the equivalent of a 70-year-old man. It was impossible for him to become a saint, so if he continued to age at the current rate the best case was for him to last three more years.

"Alright, it's getting late. Richard, your party can stay a night at Deeprock Castle, we can have dinner together. It will be a good opportunity for me to introduce you to my friends and children.

"Now, about the rune..."

As per Richard's request, the rune was to be attached in the chief mage's laboratory. The chief mage was level 14, and his specialisation in healing magic garnered him many friends and apprentices. The man was already over fifty years of age, so the sight of the young Richard left him with a bizarre look on his face.

Richard briefly introduced the rune he had prepared for the Duke. It was a general strength rune with six slots for magic crystals. If all slots were filled, it could give one a steady 20% increase in strength for a duration of three months. However, the rune would break after five uses and had to be changed for a new one.

"20%? Simply unbelievable!" the Duke said as he shed his outer robe, revealing a powerful body covered in muscles. He stood calmly before Richard, the aura of a powerhouse faintly seeping out. Richard then cast a detection spell on the Duke.

A low rumble sounded as Bevry's body started to glow. Even Richard, someone who always had great control over himself,

started trembling slightly. The Direwolf Duke had incredible capacity, with at least six possible slots; the man could easily become a grade 3 rune knight, and top of that add two grade 4 runes! If all of his slots were filled, Bevry would immediately reach the level of Gaton's thirteen!

The man saw Richard's expression changing, stretching out a little as he asked casually, "What's wrong. Am I not suitable for the rune?"

"No," Richard said after composing himself, "It's unrelated to the rune. I was shocked by your strength. I didn't know you already surpassed the strongest powerhouses of the kingdom!"

The Duke flashed a small smile at those words, not saying anything. Rather, it was the chief mage who looked at Richard with a bizarre expression once more. This young mage was only level 11, while the Duke was level 18! It wasn't impossible for a detection spell to find the Duke's level, but to do it despite such a difference in level and yet accurately figure out his power was something he himself could not have done at that level.

Richard acted as natural as possible, turning around to busy himself at the workbench. Thankfully he had figured out that Bevry was nearing level 19 with the detection spell, using that secondary knowledge as a substitute for the information on the man's capacity. In order to nudge this fragile alliance in the direction he needed, he needed to give a reasonable explanation for the smallest of things. The Duke was too sharp for anything but.

He prepared a batch of solvent, before taking the slotted rune out of the enchanted box. He embedded all the magic crystals needed, bursts of magical light condensing into bright spots in the arrays. The fuelling crystal in his hand halved in volume and turned a dull grey.

Before attaching the rune, Richard solemnly spoke up, "There is something I need to explain regarding this rune, Your Grace.

Without any knowledge of the characteristics of your strength and the properties of your energy, the rune was built with safety and non-interference in mind. Its amplification is a little worse than that of a tailor-made rune that integrates into the user's system.

“This rune uses magic crystals as a power supply, and can be used for about a year and a half. The advantage is that it doesn't draw upon your energy, so it won't be a burden on the battlefield. However, this decreases the amplification and usage time further. It's only half as useful as a normal one.”

“That's alright,” the Duke smiled, “You were very thorough in your considerations.”

The Direwolf Duke held great power, both personally and politically. Before he established full trust with Richard, he definitely wouldn't allow this foreigner to affect his energy usage. Only in Norland, where runes were an integral part of every powerhouse's strength, did people allow runemasters to tattoo runes directly.

Book 2, Chapter 162

Territory(3)

Richard sprayed some solution onto Duke Bevry's shoulder, quietly reciting the spell to slot the rune as he carefully put it in position. The skin started to sizzle the moment the rune came in contact with it, a thin layer burning off to allow the rune to fuse with him. Half a minute later, the magic arrays started to glow, the skin at the shoulder looking somewhat different from the rest of the body.

Flowsand waved her hand, casting a lesser healing spell to eliminate the pain of the attachment. The damage was insignificant to anyone with a modicum of power; the main purpose of this act was to let the Duke see her casting spells.

Bevry stretched his body, feeling no signs of discomfort. In fact, he felt a surge of power that gave him an unexpected surprise. "Let's go!" he said as he wore his robes, "We should head to the training grounds to see this thing's power."

Very quickly, the Duke's personal guard had set up three practice dummies in the training ground, one each covered with chainmail, light plate, and heavy plate. The last one was built to simulate the capabilities of enchanted armour, while Bevry himself only wielded an ordinary two-handed axe. There was no enchantment on the weapon, while the material was just ordinary steel.

The Direwolf Duke wielded this giant axe with a single hand, making it look as light as a piece of hide. He didn't hesitate in the slightest, taking large strides forward and instantly cutting the first two dummies apart. He then walked over to the one with thick plate armour, taking a deep breath and swinging the axe with pure strength alone. Even without the support of his energy, a devastating strike landed on the armour!

A deep crack immediately appeared on the thick plate. The

hardwood dummy was crushed in an instant, the armour deforming into scrap metal. However, it did not break; on the contrary, the axe in the Duke's hand bent completely while the surface was distorted. The steel handle twisted up as well, ruined beyond recognition. This ordinary axe could not withstand the Duke's tremendous strength, thoroughly reduced to scrap metal.

Having felt that burst of power, Bevry casually threw the axe to the ground as he laughed heartily, "Good! No, great! I would love to see what that old fool Whiterock can use to resist my axe now!"

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The evening's banquet was exceptionally noisy, bustling with excitement. Everyone could sense the sheer joy of the Direwolf Duke.

The Duke spoke with high spirits, talking about a direct assault on the Whiterock Dukedom. His powerful body language and penetrating voice got even Richard's adrenaline pumping. This was the first time he had seen Bevry's skill as an orator and leader.

The banquet was much larger than expected. All of the Duke's adult sons, the chief mage, the treasurer, prime minister... even the court marquesses who had no territory corresponding to their status, and several commanders of the army... there were a lot of attendees. Basically every power of Deepcliff City was present.

In the face of such a fervent atmosphere, Richard could no longer be sure whether it was the rune that had brought him joy or the hope for Perrin's survival.

The banquet only ended when it was late into the night. The Duke's butler rapped on his door shortly after, having two servants bring in a leather box that was sealed with magic. Informing him that it was a gift from the Duke, the butler retreated from the room.

Richard opened the box to find that there were more than ten

small compartments within. Each compartment had a different type of magical material, with a note indicating its name, uses, origins, and standard price. Some of the compartments only had the note; the materials they talked about were far too precious to just be lying in the Duke's treasury. Such materials were traded by the gram.

This box of samples was much more important to Richard than a single box of magical materials. Gathering and sorting the natural resources of this plane was one of Richard's most important goals, something that would allow him to find ways to maximise profit once the portal between the two was formed.

Such things were crucial to planar conquest, and formed a cornerstone of strategy. Blackgold had previously given him a real-life example as a vivid illustration on how important the quality of management was in interplanar trade. Two extremely similar planes had more than an order of difference in profit! This box of samples from the Duke would halve Richard's work in the future.

Richard spent almost all of his time over the next few days meeting various officials. A true noble position was completely different from that of a frontier knight, which only required a nominal document. It was extremely complicated and tedious to verify the borders of his territory, reporting to the Kingdom's council to confirm his crest and symbol.

Contrary to expectations, Kars was actually a capable assistant. Although he was a little incompetent and lazy, he still had the basic poise and ability of a true noble. He did a good job of taking care of the documents, especially with the formatting of the texts.

Marvin, who Richard hadn't seen ever since he arrived, also showed up after the banquet was done. He said he had been living in an inn under the Duke's control all this while, treated like an official envoy by Bevry's subordinates. However, everyone was aware that the fallen cleric would likely never see light again if the negotiations fell through.

With two nobles of Faelor under him, all of the tasks were progressing in order, although they were still difficult to accomplish. The biggest problem was that Richard had to report a complete family tree: in the eyes of the upper class, it was unthinkable for a powerful family to have no history. Marvin had already claimed that Richard had come from a dead house, thankfully, so all he had to do was fill in some details.

Once the tree was finally prepared, Richard hesitated for a long time before penning down the Archeron name. The work afterwards would be taken over by Marvin and Kars, where they ingeniously added this as a branch of a true ancient clan. The Duke's officials were smart enough to ignore the minor discrepancies.

It took a full week for all these procedures to be completed. News had already arrived from the troops who had been sent back to his territory, stating that the villagers of Bran were all dead. Richard sighed at the knowledge; no wonder Sinclair had shown up at Twilight Castle.

Citizens were indispensable to the development of a territory. The lands given by the Duke were rich and fertile, but most of the place was forests, mountains, or grasslands. Bordering on both the Land of Turmoil and the Bloodstained Lands, the place was susceptible to a two-pronged attack by magical beasts. The place was thus desolate, with few signs of human habitation. There were only three to five villages in the entire area, the total populations hovering around 2000 people.

Farming, mining, rebuilding the roads, constructing a castle, manufacturing weapons and tools... Even building the altar to the Eternal Dragon required a lot of people. The one thing Richard didn't have to worry about was a military; the broodmother would take care of that. However, even on that front things weren't too well. He had less than a hundred desert warriors and around thirty barbarians remaining under him, with fewer than twenty of the

surrendered human soldiers still alive. Zendrall had only four warriors of darkness remaining as well, but that wasn't even the worst of it. Almost all of his knights were dead as well, robbing him of a trustworthy chain of command.

Book 2, Chapter 163

Unexpected Developments

The battle with Sinclair had been the final push that allowed Richard to advance to level 11, making him a great mage on Faelor. The two trolls had levelled up as well. Phaser was only born at level 1, but with all of Sinclair's abilities as well as that dagger for her left hand, she was equivalent to a level 5 or 6 elite. In fact, she could even maim level 10 fighters if she managed to sneak up on them.

On top of all that, he had eliminated the biggest threat and formed the basis of an alliance with the Direwolf Duke. Despite the many losses, Richard felt that everything was clear.

He was in no hurry to leave, instead staying over at the Duke's for a few more days. Borrowing the chief mage's laboratory, he picked out the most damaged of the runes from the bearguard knights and repaired ten of them. This ended up with runes that offered between 10 and 15% boosts to strength, all active runes run off magic crystals unlike the passive one he had given the Duke.

All ten were sold to Duke Bevry for a total of 200,000 gold coins. 50,000 coins were given in gold and jewellery, while the rest was substituted with magic materials and enough equipment to outfit 200 soldiers.

As for whether the Duke would give these runes to his subordinates or resell them for profits, that was none of Richard's concern.

Richard had been careful in setting the price of these runes. Back at the Bloodstained Lands, he had sold two for 25,000 each. Although he knew that those people could resell the runes for twice their price in profit, the key idea was to keep the price bearable for a level 15 fighter or any great mage.

Although the runes sold to the Duke had some disparity in power, Richard had used other factors to make up for the difference. He extended the duration of the boost for some and reduced the mana drain on others, extending the lifespan of yet some more.

Any rune would lose its effects as the arrays faded. Some would die out in as early as a year, while most lost effectiveness in three years at most. Norland had already resolved this problem, but centuries ago when runecrafting was in its infancy it had been an issue for every runemaster. Only the talented saint runemasters who were like shooting stars managed to overcome this problem, building arrays that could be sustained indefinitely. Thus, few rune sets had been passed down from ancient times. However, every one of those ancient sets was of exceptional quality.

After careful consideration, Richard had decided to use the Duke as a channel to sell his runes. On one hand this allowed him to hide the origin of these runes, while at the same time giving Bevry a host of benefits that would only strengthen their alliance. Building these defective runes that were far below Norland's standard didn't take much time and energy; Richard could make two or three in a day. He had even managed to reduce the cost of production to about a thousand coins. As long as he had a stable channel to dispose of them, money would make its way into his hands.

Gold was just a symbol, but a stable channel like the Direwolf Duke could quickly transform that symbol into useful things like materials, equipment, and horses. This gold he was earning held a lot of power.

Once the transaction was completed, Richard took his party and returned to his own territory. He used 20,000 coins along the way to hire a bunch of masons and buy metal that wasn't produced nearby to build a new castle on his territory.

This castle was to be built on the river bank at the foot of a

mountain, not far away from Bran Village and close to the Bloodstained Lands. A castle here would protect the fertile river banks from horse bandits coming in from the Bloodstained Lands, and as long as those were blocked there was no need to worry about opening his lands up to agriculture.

Most of Faelor was tropical, and the lands were much more fertile than on Norland. The plane was thus rich in natural resources, needing two-thirds of the land to produce more food than Norland. Famines were thus extremely rare, most of the deaths being due to endless wars. Humans were gradually expanding, occupying more and more of the main continent as they forced the other tribes off to the larger islands. Although the population loss was stemmed due to this, as long as the unused arable lands were developed there wouldn't be any famine on the plane for centuries. Food was the basic driving factor behind a large population, an efficient labour force, and an abundance of luxuries like alcohol and meat. This was a basic principle.

The desert warriors and barbarians had already been sent ahead, clearing a basic path and building a simple barracks and stable. One of the two surviving knights was negotiating with the successor to Baron Fontaine, hoping to hire workers and purchase basic construction materials such as stone and wood. These materials were cheap, bulky, and needed in large quantities; they could only be sourced locally.

When Richard arrived at the castle's construction site, he was surprised to find a mere outline of the boundaries. Outside of about a hundred people from a nearby village, there were no workers at all. These were all his own subjects, but based on the situation in his fief this was as many as they could recruit. How long would it take to build a castle with just a hundred people?

Richard took another round around the construction site, realising that most of these people were handling stone and wood. The stone was mined from a nearby mountain by the powerful

barbarians, cut and ground by the commoners. The lumber came from the nearby forest as well, needing a long time to peel, dry, and chop.

Even this little progress was because the knight in charge of building the castle had prior experience, with skill in masonry and carpentry. The commoners definitely didn't know how to prepare or treat raw materials.

It wasn't just a lack of labour. If even the stone and wood had to be made from scratch, then it would probably take 3 to 5 years to build this castle.

Richard wasn't a small, countryside knight who could only rely on taxes to accumulate wealth. He had a lot of hold on hand that would turn into materials and labour, so it should not have been difficult to build a small castle. He had already given his knight 5,000 coins, but he definitely didn't see a corresponding labour force or materials.

A single round around the place caused him to grow a little gloomy, and he immediately called the knight in charge of the construction over to ask what was happening. This man was one of a mere two left under his command.

The knight was in his early thirties, with strength corresponding to his age. This meant that there wasn't much room for him to improve in the future. However, the man had followed him through many battles and was familiar with managing a noble's territory. That was why he had been put in charge of the castle's construction.

Book 2, Chapter 164

Unexpected Developments(2)

Small castles could normally be built with just seven or eight thousand coins. Richard had some additional requirements regarding the strength of the defences, so the costs here would exceed 20,000. The addition of rebuilding roads and the like was no small expense either, but still the initial stages wouldn't take more than 5,000 coins.

The knight respectfully saluted Richard upon saluting him, but that etiquette did not improve his mood in the least.

“What’s going on here?! Why aren’t there more workers? Are you planning to build my castle with just these fellows, little by little? Where’s Pierce, where did he go?!” Richard’s voice became increasingly stern.

The knight broke out in a cold sweat, realising that this handsome and gentle-looking young master was enraged. The imposing aura Richard was giving off made his heart palpitate. “Sir Richard, you wanted Pierce and I to go to Baron Fontaine’s territory to hire craftsmen and procure stone and wood...”

“That’s right.” Richard nodded his head, seeing the knight’s expression. He furrowed his brows, asking with a sneer, “What, did I not give you enough gold coins to purchase the items and hire the craftsmen?”

The knight laughed bitterly, “Logically speaking, the gold you gave us should have been enough. However, we truly could not buy the items or hire people. The new Baron increased the cost of all construction materials tenfold, and did the same with the masons’ salaries. We didn’t dare to make the decision ourselves, so we could only wait until you returned from Deepcliff to decide.”

Richard looked slightly stunned, “So the new baron has no

intention of selling to us...”

The knight spoke carefully, “We were of the same opinion, but since it was your command we had to continue to fight. Pierce is still at Twilight Castle, and I returned first to recruit men. However, there are only so many people here, and we can only mine and chop for the materials.”

Richard nodded wordlessly, slowly circling the construction site once more before speaking deliberately, “It seems like some people don’t wish for me to build a castle here...”

“My Lord, then...” the knight asked cautiously. He had followed Richard for quite some time, but he felt increasingly unable to see through this young great mage. Even now, Richard’s stern expression frightened him greatly.

“Continue to take care of things here, and don’t stop the construction. I’ll take a trip to Twilight Castle myself tomorrow.” Saying that, Richard returned to a two-storey wooden residence set up for him in the barracks, spreading out a copy of the map he’d obtained from the Duke and looking up the neighbouring nobles from the list Bevry had given them.

He wasn’t engrossed in thought for long before a soft knock sounded on the door.

“We’ve been travelling an entire day, why aren’t you resting?” Richard put down the list in his hands, smiling as he pulled Flowsand towards him.

The cleric huffed, smacking his hand hard, “Business first!”

Richard didn’t let go despite the pain, but at least there was no further action. “Alright,” he said, “Let’s talk. What business? We have our own business to attend to later.”

Flowsand grew furious, viciously biting down on his shoulder as she spoke through clenched teeth, “Every day and every night! Aren’t you afraid your level will drop?”

“How could that be?” Richard laughed, “My mana surges during ‘business.’ It’s the perfect time to understand many principles of magic and runes.”

“Hmph! You’re growing more and more obscene. Are you really a great mage?”

Having spent a long time with Flowsand, Richard was starting to grow more brazen as well, “According to Norland’s standard, I’m far from being a great mage.”

Hearing about Norland, the faint smile on Flowsand’s face suddenly disappeared. She sighed softly, straightening her back, “About returning to Norland... Do you have any ideas?”

“I don’t have any concrete methods, but I do have some ideas.” Richard loosened his grip, bringing her before the map as he spoke with a smile, “We’ve already taken the first steps. Now, we need to raise our strength and increase our chances of survival. The key to that is resources and military. If nothing else, as long as we have a stable channel I’ll be able to sell runes to keep the flow of gold steady. That wealth can be exchanged for materials, slaves, territory, or even mercenaries.

“We would also do well to establish some trade lines. Now that we’ve fought so many battles, I can guarantee victory in any small battlefield. As long as we’re about a thousand each, and the quality isn’t far too disparate, we won’t lose. If we continue to defeat more enemies, we can get the two materials we need the most: magic crystals and worship idols. With them, the broodmother will grow stronger and stronger.”

He then jabbed a finger at the Bloodstained Lands, “In less than three years, we will control all of this land.”

Flowsand stared at Richard’s profile, realising that this youth had slowly grown confident and decisive over time, starting to take on more responsibility. She sighed in her heart, focusing on the map as she said, “Idols aren’t as effective as the statues of a god.”

Richard was taken aback, speaking hesitantly, “That would cause an open war with a church. Even if we can do that, we should at least wait until we’ve opened a passage to Norland first. Only after we return to Norland will we have the backing to resist legendary beings.”

“Maybe going back isn’t as difficult as you think,” she said gently, caressing his face.

This time, Richard was the one that was truly shocked. He raised his head, startled, “What? We can go back right now?”

“Of course it isn’t that easy,” Flowsand smacked Richard on the head with her small fist, “The main reason we cannot return to Norland is that we lost the coordinates. Our own strength is not great enough to determine our location in the myriad planes. However, I thought of something when we were telling Bevry about that divine grace that is impossible to get. It’s difficult, but not out of the question.”

“Hmm? Can we really offer sacrifices to the Eternal Dragon through a random altar?” Richard was shocked once again.

Flowsand ran out of patience, rolling her eyes at him before smacking him again, “Of course not. The Eternal Dragon has no use for an altar without a mark. However, the Book of Time can connect to him and we can ask for the coordinates of Norland. We already know the locations of two Lighthouses of Time here on Faelor, so we can take them apart to build a new one that leads back home.”

“What?! Why didn’t I think of this method before?!” Richard said after a shout.

Flowsand looked at Richard and sighed again, “Richard... it isn’t as easy as you think it is.”

Book 2, Chapter 165

Principle

“Hmm? Why not?” Richard asked dubiously.

“An offering is a must in any wish to the Eternal Dragon,” Flowsand said slowly.

“Offering...” Richard’s expression changed as well. He had been through the ritual himself, so he knew exactly what level of offering was needed to attract the attention of the Eternal Dragon.

“Yes. That old dragon doesn’t need our faith, only our sacrifices. It follows the eternal principle of equivalent exchange,” Flowsand said viciously. She had grown up in the Church of the Eternal Dragon, so she naturally knew the kind of offerings they would need to make to return to Norland. At minimum they needed the head of a greater demon with the essence of its power still within.

She could exchange such a head for twenty years of life, but some careful consideration would show that it wasn’t much. In the eyes of the Eternal Dragon, that was worth less than a bit of powder off one of its scales.

However, Richard immediately relaxed and released a long breath, fiercely groping Flowsand’s butt as he spoke with a smile, “You’re such a miser! A way to return is already good enough, how could we be concerned with the expenses? Even if we need them, it’s not like we have to take care of that personally. We can definitely just trade runes for them or something. Anyway, isn’t Bevry taking care of that right now? Faelor is only a few millennia behind Norland. You can’t underestimate the power of a Duke.”

“It’s an indirect method!” Flowsand argued, “The initial sacrifice needs to strengthen the Book of Time, only then can we communicate with the Eternal Dragon and have it substitute the role of a church. Even if the Book is a divine weapon, it can’t be

compared to a real church. We'll lose a lot of the blessing, a lot! Only a third will be left!"

"Alright, alright! In any case, we have a method. Don't worry about the expenses, we're not taking care of that personally." Richard's hand started to trace the curve of Flowsand's rear as he spoke, and when he reached the bottom he grabbed the hem of her robe and started raising it. He was prepared for 'business.'

Flowsand sighed helplessly, no longer bothering with the issue. She was just very unaccustomed to such a thing. The same kind of offering back in Faust could be exchanged for almost thirty years of time, but through the Book of Time it was only worth ten. Still, even ten years was incredibly difficult. If they managed it, they could claim to have an incredibly solid foundation in Faelor. With that being the case, why complain? Richard's mischief had caused her to unwittingly relaxed.

Still, she pressed down on the hand that was up to no good under her robes, "I'm not done talking! I just tested Caesar, he has incredible talent for the divine. Given our current conditions, we should consider quickly raising his level. I need a few capable helpers.

"Also, I'm running out of scrolls. We have to consider getting another batch, should we find and raid another church? Also, your own power is important. You should consider giving yourself another rune."

Hearing the words 'raid a church' coming from the mouth of a cleric so naturally, Richard felt an indescribable incongruity.

He hastily sorted out his thoughts, "Don't worry about raiding a church yet. It's not like that's impossible, but we need to do it in secret. Before we finish the passage back to Norland, we can't easily reveal our identities. I already have some ideas for my next runes as well. First, I'm preparing one that allows my spells to penetrate magic barriers and the like. After that, I plan to craft

something I'm calling Nature's Domain. It will enhance my nature affinities, empowering my elven blood. That will allow for an increase in the power of Nature's Beckon."

Flowsand furrowed her brows, "So you're saying you'll get an extra summon? Six direbears at once, isn't that a little too brutal?"

Richard only chuckled in response, saying nothing. Normally, a grade 6 Nature's Beckon would only summon one to three direbears depending on the caster's luck. These bears were all around level 8 or 9, three of them together able to overwhelm a level 10 warrior. His elven blood allowed him to summon five with a single spell, and the addition of a rune would make that six. That was exactly twice as many as even the luckiest of normal mages!

And it wasn't just that. With the Book of Holding in his hands, he could store three grade 6 spells. At the same time, his own precise control of magic allowed him to cast two grade 6 spells at his current level.

In other words, if some naive fellow wanted to challenge Richard, he would end up surrounded by thirty direbears in less than a minute. This was a complete landslide, much like Sharon's own ability. Of course, it was too early to claim that he was like the legendary mage. He only had a group of bears, while she could summon groups of dragons. There was still a fundamental difference between the two; even the weakest green dragon could destroy hundreds of direbears.

And as someone who was a student of that legendary mage, Richard would not feel complacent over his achievements, "I can only defeat a normal mage of the same level. It might be useful when adventuring or on small battlefields, but it quickly loses effect as the scale grows until thirty direbears are nothing. Eventually, the bears just end up being equivalent to a cavalry unit...

"I'm actually a little confused right now, unsure of which path to

choose. If it was adventuring or small battles, strengthening my summons would not be a bad idea. It could even fundamentally change the direction of any battle. However, a strong fighter like a ranger or an assassin who can attack from afar is best fought with explosive power. And as for war, I should strengthen my group buffs or curses, like slow, haste, bull's strength, or iron skin..."

Flowsand huffed, muttering something under her breath before she spoke up, "Hey! Stop complaining about imaginary problems. What do you want your normal mages to do? Your choices are pretty good right now. At our level, thirty direbears are definitely nothing to laugh at. As for larger battles, Olar and Zendrall are much more useful than you. And once I advance another level, hehe, even you won't be able to take me down!"

Book 2, Chapter 166

Principle(2)

Richard actually nodded in agreement to Flowsand's words, "Yeah, Olar's warsong and song of exhaustion are really useful weapons. I wonder where he learnt them. However, it will be a huge problem if the opponents have a bard as well."

"There seem to be few bards in Faelor. You should be looking out for shamans," Flowsand warned.

"Mm, that's why Zendrall is important as well." Zendrall was a high-level necromancer, so his large-scale curses were a great way of restricting opposing shamans and clerics.

"Also, what's with Phaser? She has an aura of the divine around her, she might be able to learn magic in the future." This was the first time Flowsand had spoken up about Phaser since her appearance.

"She's... Hmm, how do I put this..." Richard wanted to explain, but he remembered the broodmother's warning, "She's a special drone that draws on divinity for her power. She has a mind and soul of her own, so we might be better off treating her like an actual person." Richard still knew very little about the broodmother herself, forget divinity and the soul. He didn't know how to accurately describe Phaser.

Flowsand creased her brows, falling into deep thought. However, Richard glanced at a clock and slapped her butt hard, "Alright, it's time. Beautiful Miss Flowsand, you have two choices right now. You'll have to go with me to see what went wrong with Fontaine's side tomorrow either way, so you can be good and go back right away. If you don't want to leave, then let's get down to proper business!"

Flowsand quickly leapt out of Richard's arms as her face turned

towards the door. Yet, her body moved backwards instead of forwards as she leaned back into Richard's embrace and rested her head on his shoulders. Her arms reached around the back, holding onto his waist for support as she ground against him slowly but vigorously. "Can you, young man?" she whispered slightly, the words almost inaudible.

"Why don't you find out?" Richard heard a loud boom within himself, as if a volcano was erupting in his body. He couldn't hold himself back at all, pinning her to the map and making himself in immediately. What followed after was simply an explosion of chaos.

Flowsand's screams were hoarse and a little hysterical, only causing the raging inferno within to burn incomparably brighter. He was almost unable to support himself, for a split second thinking he was trampling over Faelor's mountains and rivers. This woman was just so irresistible.

The great battle was intense and lasting. By the time Richard finally subdued the cleric, he was already deathly exhausted. He even needed Flowsand, who was the one who was pinned down in the first place, to cast a vitality spell on him. Only under the triple effects of the spell, his own rune, and an energy potion he chugged down did he start to feel better.

Sending Flowsand away, Richard pulled himself together with some difficulty as he began to wrap up his work on Nature's Domain. What could originally have been completed within two hours took double that time.

Richard took his clothes off, soaking the rune that was drawn on magical paper in solution. He then identified the position for the rune, fitting it onto the right side of his chest. The magic arrays on the cloth lit up at once, countless streaks branded into his chest as they heated up like golden-red threads. The pain was comparable to placing a soldering iron on one's body, but Richard was already used to such a thing. He just let out a grunt, enduring the agony as

if it was nothing.

A few potions later, Richard's mana had already fused with the Nature's Domain rune. His perception of the surrounding forest grew clearer and clearer, the fuzzy elven bloodline within him growing distinct and powerful.

What surprised Richard the most was the strengthening of his connection with Norland's seven moons. This was particularly so for the seventh, the golden moon. He could only sense it rarely before, but now it was much more present. He had never been able to use the power of the seventh moon before.

Once he ensured that his body and runes were in good condition, he began to meditate and rest. The mana piercing rune could be put off until a later date, even a month or two would be no problem. Nature's Domain had greatly boosted his summoning spells, making him as good as a druid of the same level. More ideas came to his mind for the piercing rune as well; once the ideas were realised completely, the final rune would be grade 2.

Even at grade 2, runes that boosted magic weren't common. On the other hand, his own rune would be able to drop an enemy's magical defences and resistance by an entire two levels. A grade 5 shield would only be as effective as grade 3 under the influence of his power.

However, there was another major significance to that. This rune would finally allow him to officially join the ranks of true runemasters!

The framework of the magic arrays was already completed. He just needed to finish some calculations and choose the materials for the rune; it was merely a matter of time.

Even for someone as calm as him, the idea of becoming a true runemaster set off a whirlwind of emotions deep in his heart. He couldn't help but think back to the lives of those saint runemasters, powerful and glorious heroes in Norland's history.

How many of them were true runemasters by the age of seventeen? Did he already have his own place in the history books?

Sadly, the memories left him a little dejected. There was no lack of young geniuses amongst the saint runemasters. Outside of Saint Peter, who had only made sudden progress in his middle age to create the divine rune sets, most other saints had been great intellectuals. Some had even become true runemasters at the age of twelve or thirteen, or were extremely quick to progress when they took up the craft.

Truth be told, there was no lack of gifted individuals in Norland. There were many in history who had advanced earlier than Richard had; it was just that most remained stuck without much progress for the rest of their lives. Only a small minority even became great runemasters.

Still, Richard smiled as he set all his excitement, anticipation, and apprehension aside. Even as a grade 1 set, Breath of Darkness was enough for him to leave his mark on the ages...

A night of meditation passed quickly, and early the next morning he had already finished breakfast and gathered all of his companions. His equipment packed, he left for Twilight Castle in the company of tens of desert warriors and barbarians.

Amongst the small troop were twenty throwers, looking like hybrids of troggs and dwarves. They were clad in custom leather armour, each with five hatchets hanging from their belts. However, their mightiest weapons were the bone axes on their backs.

The troop was led by an elite thrower, a creature that possessed power equivalent to a level 10 warrior. This was two levels higher than the power of the average thrower, and atop that the elite possessed outstanding intelligence and authority that allowed it to command its lesser kin. It was used to relay Richard's orders to the remaining drones. Such elite units would only grow more relevant

as the scale of the wars continued to increase.

Richard's army wasn't particularly large, only about a hundred strong, but with both his common soldiers and elites depleted in the battle against Sinclair, the new Baron didn't have any way to resist it.

However, this change in the young baron truly was too abrupt. Less than half a month had passed since Richard had fought side by side with his father, but the boy's attitude had already changed completely. Richard didn't believe this was for no reason. However, an internal battle for power couldn't possibly have caused such effect so quickly. After all, the young baron was the appointed successor to the position. As his liege, the Direwolf Duke himself guaranteed the boy's rule.

On the other hand, Richard had just established an alliance with that same duke. Bevry couldn't possibly resort to such useless tricks behind his back, there was simply no need. If the Duke wanted to harm Richard, he could just hand him over to a church. The man clearly had expectations for this alliance; the 200,000 gold in currency and supplies was proof enough of that.

Although Richard had only known the old baron for a while, they had gone through a life and death battle together. His knowledge, wisdom, and excellent swordsmanship had left a deep impression. If it wasn't necessary to do otherwise, Richard was still willing to act unaware of the cold treatment of the baron's remaining family. However, Fontaine's lands happened to be in the middle of Richard's own lands and the heart of the Sequoia Kingdom. Some major trade routes passed through those lands, and if he wanted to avoid them he would need to detour for almost a hundred kilometres. Many cheap, bulk goods would become more expensive to transport than to buy.

Moreover, there was zero development in his new fief. The large swathe of land was almost devoid of human habitation, and supplies from the Fontaines were absolutely necessary to actually

get it somewhere. No matter what, Richard wouldn't let problems with logistics arise at his own base. If the matter wasn't settled right away, his lands would constantly be pressured under dagger point. He would head over to Twilight Castle himself, and find out who was manipulating these events. The new baron was basically still a child; that boy didn't have the courage and experience to try this with him.

Book 2, Chapter 167

Meeting

Richard's territory was only a short distance from Twilight Castle, so a quick march soon brought them to the castle gates.

When they reported the reasons for their arrival, the guard had them wait outside as he informed the Baron. The officer's strength was quite amazing for his role, he was already level 9. This would make sense in an Earl's territory, but it was far too extravagant for a mere baron. A level 9 warrior could find good employment anywhere. It wasn't like none of them were willing to guard gates, but most barons didn't have the income to employ them.

Richard remained detached as he watched the officer enter the castle, realising that he had never seen this man in the previous battle. In that battle where they just piled soldier after soldier on the bearguard knights, a level 9 warrior would definitely be a central focus. Richard trusted his own memory; he wouldn't forget any of Fontaine's subordinates who had that much strength.

'An outsider is guarding these gates,' he pondered as he waited patiently, 'It seems like they want to filter out unwanted people.'

Richard dismounted quite early into the wait, sitting peacefully on the road in front of the castle gates. A fair number of people in the castle were ordinary warriors or commoners, and a few of them seemed like they recognised the mage who had won the desperate battle for them. However, their expressions were slightly strange. They didn't say a word when their gazes landed on him, only starting to discuss things amongst themselves once they got further away.

They were completely aware that Richard was unwelcome. However, they weren't foolish enough to jump out and make a ruckus to gain some merit. Although he was merely a frontier knight with some noble background, he still wasn't someone the

commoners could humiliate as they wished. He could just have them killed in return, just offering Fontaine some compensation to settle everything.

The afternoon sunlight grew increasingly fierce, the shade of the tree Richard was resting under gradually fading away. A strong, murderous intent began to grow from behind Richard. Waterflower, Gangdor, Zendrall, and even the barbarians were all filling with bloodlust. The only constant was the desert warriors—however, that was merely because they were always violent and merciless. Only the throwers seemed to be rooted to the ground, not moving at all. They were mere drones with no minds of their own; only the elite had any form of intelligence.

The wait ended up lasting an entire hour. Just as Richard was about to get up and leave, the guard officer hastily walked out of the castle, “The Baron is free now; he is waiting for you.”

Richard nodded, standing up and heading towards the castle. However, the officer immediately barred his way again before pointing at Gangdor and the barbarians who formed his personal guard, “They can’t go in. You enter alone.”

Richard slowed his footsteps, looking at the officer and asking calmly, “My army’s already been left behind, but now I can’t even bring my own personal guard?”

The officer spat hard at the ground and said fiercely, “You’re just a tiny frontier knight! Just be thankful the Baron is willing to see you. What personal guard are you talking of?” The officer was originally indifferent towards Richard, but now he was sharp as an arrow.

Richard stared mutely at the officer for an entire thirty seconds before he laughed, motioning behind him as he instructed, “Gangdor. Half his teeth and a leg.”

Gangdor grunted an acknowledgement, his large hand grabbing the officer. The fellow was stunned, only able to feel a steely grip

around him. His parrying arm was knocked aside with a thump, and he ended up raised by the neck. A dozen or so powerful slaps left his head spinning, sending bloodstained teeth flying everywhere. Gangdor then threw him down with force, crushing his knee under his feet. The steel armour deformed completely, sinking down into the flesh.

The officer wailed like a pig, his eyes rolling back as he quickly fainted from the pain. Even though he knew the man couldn't hear him speak anymore, Richard still spoke coldly, "You're not even a frontier knight, but you dare speak to me this way?"

The dozen guards who had originally been lined up by the statue in front of Twilight Castle, waiting silently, suddenly went into an uproar. They held their weapons tightly as a few swordsmen poked their heads out from the castle gates, drawing their swords and starting to flank around Richard.

Richard glanced at the guards and said coolly, "You'd best inform the Baron of this quickly. Also tell him this: if anyone waves a weapon at me, I'll consider it a challenge from him!"

The guards looked at each other, many growing afraid as they slowly lowered the weapons that had been raised high in the air. The few swordsmen that had emerged from the gates looked fervently at the unconscious officer on the ground, swords tightly grasped, but nobody dared draw close.

Richard gazed icily at the people before him. There were a few familiar faces amongst the guards, but the swordsmen were all entirely foreign to him. However, he noticed two with swords that were quite similar to the late Baron's.

A few of the older guards quickly bypassed the swordsmen, charging into the castle to send word to the Baron. Those that stayed behind took several steps back, eyes flickering as they avoided Richard's gaze. They looked at the unconscious officer from time to time, and then at the people behind Richard.

However, nobody had the guts to charge forth.

Most of the guards here had participated in that terrifying battle. They were very familiar with Richard's party; those were all vicious monsters who could fight even Sinclair herself. All twelve of them wouldn't even be a match for the one brute!

It was only then that they remembered how terrifying the power of this unremarkable frontier knight was.

This time, Richard only waited two minutes before the butler of the castle ran out. His forehead was beaded with sweat, evidence of his extreme anxiety. He gasped for breath once he caught sight of Richard, saying, "Lord Richard, the Baron welcomes you."

"Then what about my people?" Richard asked, as if nothing had happened just now.

The butler took a look behind Richard, "The army has to be left outside the castle, but you can definitely bring your personal guard."

"Alright, come in with me!" Richard pointed out to twenty people.

"That... seems a bit much..." The butler kept wiping away the surging sweat, but couldn't muster the courage to stop him.

A short while later, Richard and the little Baron met in the drawing room of Twilight Castle. The boy still looked rather juvenile; the luxurious clothing did not increase his dignity, rather leaving him at a loss. Perhaps to reduce his fear, a row of tall and sturdy warriors was stood behind him. There were even two middle-aged nobles seated at one end of the room. One of them was the late Baron's younger brother, while the other was someone Richard had never seen before.

Although Richard had brought twenty people into the castle, he suddenly grew very amicable once he entered and left most of them in the outer hall. Only he, Flowsand, Gangdor, and Olar

headed in.

Book 2, Chapter 168

Meeting(2)

Richard surveyed the room, finding that the little Baron was secretly watching the expressions of the middle-aged man. He asked gently, “Lord Fontaine, your father and I fought side by side not too long ago. Our families should only be growing closer.”

Before the young Baron could answer, his uncle snickered, “A frontier knight wishes to have a close relationship with a Baron’s family? Wait till you become a titled knight!”

Richard glanced calmly at the man, “Indeed, a frontier knight is not a noble.”

“A frontier knight clearly isn’t a titled knight!” the Baron’s uncle burst into laughter, “Wait till you have your own territory, and earn the recognition of the royal family. Only then are you a true noble. You need to be a title knight!”

Richard chuckled, but refused to explain further. Since the man couldn’t understand the meaning behind his words, there was no need to say any more. His gaze landed on the little Baron once more, “Lord Fontaine, it seems like you don’t want me building a castle in my lands?”

“Ah, no... Wait, what does your castle’s construction have to do with me?!” the youth answered in a panicky manner. Although he had a row of warriors behind him, they gave him no comfort.

At that moment, the silent middle-aged man finally spoke up, “Lord Richard, the location of your castle doesn’t seem to match up with the lands you’ve registered for yourself. If my memory doesn’t fail me, that piece of land should belong to the Direwolf Duke.”

Richard took a look at him, answering without a change in expression, “Yes. His Grace knighted me officially a few days ago.

That piece of land is mine.”

The man frowned, “That land is much larger than a normal knight’s. This doesn’t seem quite right.”

“May I know who you are?” Richard asked with a smile.

The fellow waved his arm around, “It doesn’t matter who I am —”

“If it doesn’t matter,” Richard immediately interrupted him, “then shut up.”

The other party’s face flashed with indignance, and he even opened his mouth to rage, but in the end he quieted down. Although he looked extremely grumpy, he was cunning enough not to fall for the trap. He clearly had great background and status.

Still, Richard had already discovered that this middle-aged noble was the key to the Fontaines’ change in attitude. The uncle obviously held all the power over the youth, using the child as a figurehead for his own purposes. Most interesting was that Lord Moonbear was nowhere to be seen; the Lord had planned to stay behind to defend the barony for some time.

“Lord Fontaine. I have basically no residents in my territory. I need wood, stone, and people to hire. Can you provide them?”

The uncle answered ahead of the Baron once again, “My deepest apologies, Sir Richard. Our family needs to renovate Twilight Castle now as well, so we have few materials to give. It’s not that we won’t supply to you, but it will be slightly expensive.”

Richard suddenly laughed, shaking his head, “Ten times the normal price is slightly expensive? Ha, fine. I understand. Where’s Pierce? Hand him over, and I’ll leave right now.”

The little Baron paled slightly, apparently not expecting the matter to be resolved so easily. The uncle’s eyes flickered as well, he was clearly stunned. For his part, Richard stood up and began to admire the ancient decorations placed in the room. The Fontaine

Family was several centuries old, so they naturally had many exquisite items. A vase on a platform and the oil painting on the wall were both quality goods with exorbitant prices.

Richard picked up the vase, flipping it over in his hand as he played with it. Seeing the crystal vase worth thousands of coins being tossed about, the little Baron couldn't hold back any longer, "Sir Richard..."

Crash! The crystal vase fell from Richard's hands, breaking apart into pieces. Richard turned and smiled gently at the young Baron, "What is it, Lord Fontaine?"

Everyone but Richard immediately focused on the crystal shards on the ground. Even without much ability at appraisal, one would know how valuable this vase was. Thousands of coins had disappeared in a single, crisp sound.

The young Baron grew incoherent, the boy having no idea of what he wanted to say, "Richard... You..."

"What about me?" Richard asked with a smile. His hand elegantly brushed by the mantel of the fireplace. A gorgeous, handmade enchanted clock made of expensive materials slid down from his fingertips, crashing hard into the floor. Thankfully, the thick carpet below ensured that the clock was only dented a little, but with how precise magic tools were any tiny harm could destroy the formation within. Restoring it would not be an issue of just a few hundred coins.

Watching another thousand coins disappear at Richard's hands, the uncle couldn't sit still any longer. He suddenly got up, pointing at Richard as he scolded loudly, "How dare a mere knight behave so atrociously in Twilight Castle?"

"Oh? I'm behaving atrociously, am I? I don't think so, I'm just in a bad mood. Besides, I may just be a titled knight but don't forget that I'm a frontier knight as well. Even if I'm behaving atrociously in Twilight Castle, what can you do about it? Are we going to

fight? How about a war?!”

The baron's uncle was stunned, wanting to shout, but found himself unable to speak a word. A true battle? He was the only remaining high-level swordsman in the entire Fontaine Family, and he was only level 11. The personal guard of the Baron looked fierce, but they were only level 5 or 6. In front of true powerhouses, they were no better than a group of sheep.

Richard's men were only ten or so metres away, resting in the outer hall. Even if he ignored Gangdor, those barbarians alone left him terrified. The innate talent of their race allowed them to fight beyond their level. If they really were to fight, everyone in this drawing room would be killed in a matter of minutes.

As for war, no matter how haughty and ignorant he was even he wouldn't think the less than two hundred experienced soldiers and a few hundred fresh recruits could stand up to Richard. The uncle was utterly shocked, frantically looking towards the middle-aged man who was sitting still.

This was not what they had planned. They knew Richard was a powerful mage, but he was also a child of a historied noble family. Despite his connections with the deceased Baron, the Fontaines were expressing their disdain. They also flouted the supply contract that the Direwolf Duke had arranged for. Richard should have furiously stalked off, looking for Duke Bevry to right this wrong. This was a common path in an altercation between two nobles who served the same lord.

As for any accidents that might occur on his way back, that would have had nothing to do with the Fontaines. But what could they do now? If they couldn't fight, and they couldn't wage a war... Were they supposed to reason with Richard?

Book 2, Chapter 169

The Next War

When Richard pulled the oil painting off the wall, that unknown noble couldn't hold back any longer, "Young man! You may not be afraid of fighting the Fontaines, but what about others?"

Richard chuckled, "So now we see your true intentions. Let me guess... Who could it be that wants to declare war on me... If I'm not wrong, your master should be the Highland Unicorn?"

The middle-aged man's expression changed as he hummed, not speaking further. He was a clever fellow; this was not the primary battlefield, and nothing would come of offending Richard. He was also occupied with trying to think of the reason for which Richard had managed to identify him so quickly. If the Direwolf Duke received word before they could eliminate Richard, things would become difficult to settle. Pulling away one of Bevry's vassals and attacking another would not look good.

Viscount Zim was a special existence. If Richard was killed, the situation would end up completely different. After all, history was written by the victors.

"Enough. End the games, now. My time is precious. Bring my man out, or my mood is going to get worse and worse," Richard stated calmly, reaching out and dragging his hand across the painting. A sharp crack sounded as the expensive piece of art was cut apart in the centre.

The uncle glared furiously at Richard, telling his servants to bring Pierce out immediately. It was a scant few minutes before the knight was dragged out, injuries all over his body. As someone who knew the arts of the underworld himself, Richard could tell that Pierce had been locked up and tortured for a few days. The man's two attendants were even worse off; if not for Flowsand, they might even be left handicapped for life.

The servants had brought Pierce out as quickly as possible, but in those few minutes nearly ten thousand gold's worth of antiques disappeared under Richard's hands. Richard didn't even bat an eyelid upon seeing his subordinate, merely telling Olar to carry them out of the castle. He then stood up, bidding the young Baron and his uncle farewell. At no point did he seem shocked or infuriated by the state of his men, not even asking anything about the obvious injuries on Pierce's body.

However, that display only left the Baron's uncle even more disheartened. His plans to make use of Pierce to force Richard's hands had dissipated into thin air. Seeing the mage about to leave, he couldn't help but get up with the urge to sound the alarm. However, seeing the elite guards in the outer hall, he had no choice but to acknowledge his situation and avoid doing something foolish.

Richard only halted once before leaving the room, turning back and stating calmly, "It's impossible to distance oneself from the Duke without paying a price."

Once they left Twilight Castle, Olar approached Richard and asked, "The Fontaines treated you so badly, my Lord. How are you not angry?"

"Angry? Why would I get angry?" Richard still retained a little smile, "There's no point in that. We'll just wipe them out."

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Back at the base, Richard immediately had his army prepare for battle. Since Zim wanted to battle, he obviously wouldn't wait till the castle was built. The Viscount was acting much faster than he had anticipated; it seemed like the fat fellow really did have some skill to back up his insolence.

Pierce was one of Richard's two remaining knights. Thanks to Flowsand's treatment, all of his hidden injuries had been healed. Marvin and Kars would treat him over the next few days; although

fallen clerics weren't exactly proficient at healing, they were still high enough in level to cast the basic spells. With the severe lack of mid-and low-ranking officers, people like Pierce were the true supportive structure of his army.

He had the equipment he had purchased from the Duke brought out, equipping the hundred or so desert warriors. Their leather armour was replaced with chainmail, the ordinary machetes, replaced with steel falchions. The might of his cavalry was boosted immediately.

Fontaine would undoubtedly bar his way back to the Sequoia Kingdom, so Richard knew he couldn't look for supplies and much-needed troops from there. Obviously, that also meant he couldn't send word to Deepcliff City. However, he had no plans of asking the Direwolf Duke for help anyway. It seemed like Lord Moonbear had been pulled away from Twilight Castle although recruitment for new troops hadn't been completed. Whether the man was deceived by the Baron or there were other reasons pertaining to Bevry, Richard couldn't afford the distraction of asking for assistance. The most important goal now was to achieve victory in the imminent battle.

The strength of Richard's army was steadily rising. Every three days, nine throwers entered the fold. He had exhausted basically all of his magic crystals, allowing the broodmother to create three throwers, six ordinary wind wolves, or four poisonous wind wolves in a day. The throwers were more useful in direct warfare, so he'd tasked her with creating batches of them immediately.

The increased ability to consume food had left the broodmother with constant energy reserves, to the point that there were few situations where she was below half capacity. This left Richard curious as to what exactly she was eating in the Land of Turmoil. However, regardless of what it was, her presence ensured that time was on his side.

And yet, Zim didn't take long to arrive. Before Richard could get

another batch of nine throwers, an army of over a thousand people arrived from the Bloodstained Lands. They were less than fifty kilometres away from his territory.

With his wind wolves wandering the Bloodstained Lands on patrol, Richard quickly understood the structure of this gigantic army. There were 50 elite heavy cavalry, plus another 150 light cavalry and 100 archers. That left the remaining 700 soldiers to as footsoldiers. This was a sound, balanced army; the most complete and effective that Richard had faced to date. With this balance of troops, an experienced commander would be very difficult to deal with.

Zim had no lack of quality equipment for his troops, and outnumbered him five to one. The only advantage Richard had was that he had a number of powerhouses on his end that could hold down the opponents.

An army of this scale could even siege a Baron's territory. That alone was sufficient evidence of the sheer trauma Richard had left Zim with in the Bloodstained Lands. The more troops the Viscount deployed, the more difficult the aftermath would be to deal with. Still, he had brought a majority of his soldiers.

Richard had checked up on Viscount Zim after that day, getting detailed information about him from the Direwolf Duke. The Highland Unicorn did indeed have the right to be arrogant and rude, and Richard had guessed correctly that day as well. Most of the Viscount's value came from the thing between his legs.

Zim's father was Earl Yatu, while his mother was the current king's cousin sister. His uncle was one of the three dukes of the kingdom as well, Duke Grasberg. However, background alone was not enough to justify his rashness and overbearing behaviour.

All sense of superiority was inherited. The royal bloodline of the Sequoia Kingdom was said to descend from ancient sacred beasts. The first humans of the family had only appeared after a few

generations. Zim had the most concentrated bloodline in the last two decades, and it was even a powerful unicorn bloodline.

That was why he had grown so arrogant. Many nobles—including branches of the royal family— sent their daughters to him in the hopes that they would have a child with a powerful bloodline, even though history had made it clear that the chances of that happening were minute. The special favours and free reign ended up shaping the Viscount's current behaviour. He had never lacked power, status, or women; Richard was the first large obstacle he had come across in life.

Book 2, Chapter 170

The Next War(2)

Richard spread out a map, cautiously checking the terrain and situation around them. The opposing army had a lot of footsoldiers, so they moved at a slow pace. They were currently fifty kilometres away, which would require an entire day's march to cover. Even after that, they would need a night's rest before they could attack.

The lands on the border of the Sequoia Kingdom and the Bloodstained Lands experienced a sudden rise in elevation, so Richard's fief was several hundred metres higher than the Bloodstained Lands. The terrain was complicated here, with many mountainous regions that were difficult to traverse. The place lent itself greatly to guerilla warfare, so Richard decided to fight Zim's army here. Although his troops were fewer in number, they were all elites with the experience of numerous battles. He always prized their adaptability, and this battlefield was one that required exactly that.

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As night fell slowly, Viscount Zim's army came to a stop. They would set off at dawn, reaching Richard's lands the next afternoon. The young Baron Fontaine had already been bought over, agreeing to not provide labour and materials to Richard. This would leave their enemies without any defensive structures; even the barracks would be a temporary building.

The Highland Unicorn himself was pacing around a huge, luxurious tent in the centre of the base, occasionally cursing loudly at Richard. When not throwing expletives, he was imagining how he would torture that damned frontier knight, leaving him so excited he could not sleep.

There were four beautiful noble ladies in the tent, making it seem

slightly crowded. These daughters of noble houses were acting like maids, pouring him water and wine. The traditional laws of not bringing women along only applied to the regular soldiers, holding no power over Zim. Most of this army was made of his personal troops anyway.

Zim continued waving his fist around, declaring that he wanted a fight to the death in Richard's territory. As a true noble, he would defeat that mere frontier knight who had come out from goodness-knows-where. However, at the same time, many warhorses used the cover of the night to gradually near the base. The horses' hooves were covered with cloth, preventing any sounds from their trot. The desert warriors atop were masters at horsemanship, so their mounts remained very docile under their command.

A small group of soldiers was patrolling the temporary base in circles, gradually growing farther away from the small team. Richard waited until they were out of sight to raise his right hand, upon which Olar immediately brought out his bow and aimed straight at the camp. When the hand fell, two enchanted arrows flew soundlessly through the night sky like comets, burying themselves into the two sentinels on the watchtower.

The sentinels immediately fell down. Although they couldn't make any sounds themselves, the heavy thuds still alarmed quite a few of the warriors. However, it was at this exact moment that Richard pointed forward, having the dozens of desert warriors behind him spur their horses on towards the camp.

A few barbarians charged towards the sides of the camp with large strides, making quick work of the crude fence with the large axes in their hands. They met a few soldiers who had just run out of their tents, chuckling menacingly as they brandished their large axes to bring down the first few who weren't adjusted to the darkness. They then headed towards another tent, where alarmed shouts were ringing out. The soldiers within were still wearing their clothes and armour, unaware that the god of death had

already come for them.

Two sturdy warriors surrounded the tent, taking a deep breath before whirling their axes at the same time. A sharp whistle sounded before the cries within suddenly disappeared; with its pillars broken apart, the tent had collapsed completely. Blood quickly soaked the cloth.

The warriors were still eager to continue, slashing wantonly at the bulges in the cloth a few times. Every attack turned the cloth redder, and it was only when a dozen soldiers approached them in formation that they were forced to stop. A low-ranking officer was at the head of this group of soldiers, preventing the barbarians from advancing any further.

At that moment, a burning fireball pierced the darkness to land in front of the soldiers. The explosion sent four of them flying, turning four more into human torches. The barbarians seemed fearless, quickly moving into the broken formation and charging the officer down. Their goal was not to kill as many as they could; it was more important to sow chaos and kill the leaders. Without their captains, the footsoldiers would just be scattered sand.

Even as the barbarians' axes were raised high, they suddenly felt a breeze blow past them. How could any breeze blow in this world of raging flames and energy? Their eyes twitched as they continued to prepare the attacks, but the officer in front of them suddenly went stiff. A blade with no lustre poked out of his chest, piercing right through his heart.

Phaser appeared behind the officer like a demon. Her body half-bowed, she swiftly passed between the two barbarians and hid behind them. These warriors knew that this assassin was one of Richard's warriors, so they roared and brought their axes down, cutting down the soldiers who were pursuing her.

Richard was currently moving along the borders of the camp. He already had a clear picture of the chaos in the camp, three sides

already broken into by his army. Zim's enormous and eye-catching tent was less than a hundred metres away, but over a hundred elites were already gathered around it. A level 14 general was shouting out commands, gathering the scattered soldiers and grouping them in defensive formations.

The ability to form a defensive line around the Viscount was proof enough of this general's ability. The soldiers under him were also courageous and powerful. Seeing the neat defensive formation around the large tent, Richard gave up on his initial plan of using the ambush to capture Zim alive.

However, the true attack had yet to occur. Wandering around the camp in the night, Richard launched fireball after fireball into the fray. The large projectiles normally set three or four tents on fire, and the raging winds from the flames only helped the chaotic inferno spread further.

All of a sudden, many cries started ringing from the camp's stables. Nobody had noticed as a greyish ball of light flew into the stable, silently exploding into a mental attack on the squires guarding the place. Everyone started panicking, and the warhorses were startled as well. They began to kick and bite, doing their best to struggle free of the ropes.

In the midst of that chaos, screams and shouts rang out in the night sky. A bunch of hatchets whizzed through the air, cutting down seven or eight of the squires in the confusion. These hatchets were immensely powerful, able to cleave the bone off even the majestic warhorses.

BANG! The stable fences were torn apart by the two trolls, and the barbarians and desert warriors quickly flooded the stables to begin an attack on the squires. Another fear spell landed in the midst of the enemy. The location and timing were extremely precise, ensuring that the seemingly chaotic desert warriors were not caught in its effects. The squires were all debilitated, and the barbarians who had charged ahead were barely affected given the

natural valour of their race. With half their opponents incapacitated, the battle ended up being a massacre.

Another strange wave of yells rang through the night, but nobody could tell the language of these screams. Another wave of hatchets quickly flew through the sky, cutting down ten of the squires who were huddled together. Their morale finally hit rock bottom in the face of this fierce offense, and they began to escape in all directions.

Book 2, Chapter 171

Nightly Attack

Richard's army did not give chase, instead starting to steal the horses. Desert warriors were natural horsemen, so they quickly managed to take forty of the elite warhorses and leave. The trolls and barbarians followed rapidly, escaping into the darkness.

Hatchets were flying everywhere in the night sky, this time aimed at the remaining warhorses. Four fireball spells landed in the middle of the barracks as well, not very powerful but covering a wide area that enveloped almost half of the horses. The raging flames lit tens of horses on fire.

Seeing the stable burning in the distance, Richard knew that the ambush was a success. He immediately sent out a mental order to retreat. A long whistle pervaded the night sky, and all the attacking warriors immediately stopped and retreated. They had withdrawn in an instant.

At the fence, Phaser was making use of the shadows to hurry and escape. However, one of Zim's warriors blocked her way.

Phaser was rapidly gasping for breath. Still a newborn, the rapid killing spree had expended more than half of her energy. The soldier laughed maliciously as he approached, his eyes on her exquisitely fair neck. To him, it was obvious that this neck belonged to a beautiful woman. His breath grew rough as he looked down, seeing the bulge of her breasts. Even the dark robe covering Phaser's body could not hide her curves.

Without the necessary energy, Phaser could not use her powers. The mere level 6 soldier in front of her was a major threat. Seeing the seasoned veteran shift his gaze, she suddenly opened a slit in her long robe to reveal her body from neck to navel. Every inch of exposed skin was white as snow, and from that angle it seemed like there was nothing under the robe!

Even as the soldier was stunned, she threw herself towards his chest. Before the man even had a chance to react, he felt a slight pain in his abdomen before a strong numbness pervaded his body. He lost all feeling in a flash, lowering his head to find that this girl's left arm didn't end in a hand; it was a blade! The sharp edge of the dagger had penetrated his abdomen.

The soldier tried to struggle, but she raised her right arm and tore his armour apart. Another slash later, his ribs were torn apart. Her right hand then dug deep into the wound on his chest, grasping his violent heart and tearing it out with a strong yank. She then pulled down her mask, downing it in a few bites before she rushed back towards their own camp.

However, she stopped in her tracks only a few steps later. Her exposed eyes started to flicker, continuously scanning her surroundings in search of something.

A blade silently appeared around her neck, making her stop moving altogether. A cold, harsh voice sounded by her ear, "There's no need to look, I'm right here."

Phaser slowly raised both her hands and turned around, meeting Waterflower's steely gaze.

"What are you? How.... are you related to Sinclair?" Waterflower asked coldly. She had not witnessed Phaser's birth, so all she knew was that this girl was a new follower of Richard.

Waterflower had sustained severe injuries in that battle with Sinclair, so she bore immense hatred and trauma from the event. Phaser had just displayed several skills similar to Sinclair, especially with that dagger and the devouring of hearts. Memories of Sinclair flashed across her mind; Phaser seemed like a shadow of that demonic lady.

Phaser's eyes twinkled as her mind raced at inhuman speeds. Only a blink of an eye later, she started speaking words that were completely foreign to Waterflower. The only clue that it was a

language at all was the pattern of speech.

The young lady locked both her brows, but she was unwilling to let the other party know that she didn't understand any of what she said. Phaser opened her mouth and spoke non-stop, leaving her completely baffled. The Shepherd of Eternal Rest was still on Phaser's neck, but Waterflower started to have second thoughts.

The wild girl was someone who relied on instinct; it was extremely rare for her to think things out. However, the conclusion she drew from her reflection left Waterflower unsatisfied. As Richard's soulguard, she knew that there was a link between her master and that of the lady in front of her. This meant Phaser was a reliable ally; soul contracts were the most reliable method of controlling someone else.

However, the young lady's instincts kept telling her that she had to kill these creatures right now. If she did not do so, she would regret it greatly in the future.

The thuds of many footsteps sounded not far away; a team of soldiers was rapidly making its way towards them. Waterflower let out a groan, slowly sheathing the Shepherd of Eternal Rest and disappearing into the night. Phaser looked at the approaching soldiers, her own body blending into the darkness. The heart she ate had allowed her to recover enough energy to go invisible.

The broodmother hadn't told Richard everything about this special unit. Phaser had a potent venom of her own; although it couldn't be compared to the manticore's yet, there wouldn't be much difference once she reached level 15. Even now, her toxin was fatal if injected directly into the bloodstream. Just like Sinclair, she could also devour enemy hearts to restore energy. Of course, that was mainly for humans; different species had different centres of power.

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The troop of soldiers had seen two enemies from far away, but

now that they had rallied together and approached all they could see was the boundless night sky. They couldn't even find any traces of the escaped enemies.

The fire in the camp was soon put out, and Viscount Zim made a round around the camp under heavy guard before returning to his large tent. There was chaos everywhere, with several soldiers placing the bodies of their fallen comrades in a corner while wounded warriors were everywhere. Three low-level clerics had started healing the wounded, but seeing the long line they turned pale and felt helpless.

“Bastards! Useless BASTARDS! How exactly did you keep watch that the enemies made it right in front of my tent? If not for my innate luck, would I not be hurt by those bumpkins? Tell me, what do you do except waste my gold? TELL ME!” Zim's roars could be heard from within, with shattering sounds ringing out every now and then.

His personal guards stood still and upright with no expressions on their faces; they had long grown used to hearing such things. Once he grew tired of the shouting, he sat down to catch his breath. It was only then that the general started reporting casualties to the Viscount. Most of the major casualties had been to footsoldiers, with more than a hundred dead. On the other hand, less than ten light cavalry and a mere two heavy cavalry had perished.

Zim's expression improved slightly. The heavy cavalry were his elite soldiers, while the light cavalry were mere soldiers and the footsoldiers just cannon fodder. Their deaths meant nothing. Most of the Viscount's gold was spent on the elites—equipping a heavy knight was as expensive as outfitting fifty normal footsoldiers.

Book 2, Chapter 172

Nightly Attack(2)

The general seemed extremely distressed to report the serious losses in terms of their mounts. Over forty of the heavy cavalry's horses had been snatched, with a lot more dead or gravely injured. An initial headcount left them with only a hundred horses, with less than ten that could carry the heavy knights.

“WHAT?!” Viscount Zim shrieked, turning pale as if he was about to faint at any moment, “Only ten of my adorable, expensive horses are left? What’s going on?!”

Every heavy cavalier of the Viscount's army had two elite warhorses assigned to them, the single greatest cost of building the heavy cavalry in the first place. If only ten such horses were remaining, that was a loss of tens of thousands of coins! How could he not feel heartbreak?

The general hung his head down low, not saying a word. He hadn't said something: the enemy's true goal with this ambush was likely the stable itself, not the Viscount. However, if he said this he knew the arrogant Highland Unicorn wouldn't stand it. In order to wash off the disgrace, he would order the army to advance to a battle to the death with the people who had humiliated him.

The general knew Zim quite well. This information would lead the Viscount to strip him of command, leaving a bleak fate for the army. Richard's forces had shown ferocity and tactical brilliance with this nightly attack, passing through them like a breeze to break them in a single strike. They dealt a heavy blow and fled into the distance, not wishing to fight further. The general wouldn't dare underestimate an enemy like this, even if their numbers were less than half of the Viscount's own. If Zim were to take command...

The general was already prepared to suffer through the tongue-

lashing. Once the Viscount tired out, he would go to sleep. Everything would be forgotten the next day, and Zim would follow his suggestions. In the end, those warhorses and soldiers were only a loss of gold. That was the one thing the Viscount lacked the least, although he still felt his heart ache at the loss of even a few hundred coins.

However, once the storm passed the captain of the Viscount's personal guard entered the camp. Seeing him, the general immediately turned grim. This fellow was tall, bold, and magnificent, but his level 10 strength was only so-so. The only reason he had the position of guard captain was that he was the Viscount's cousin, and specialised in sucking up to the Viscount and tattling on others.

As expected, the first sentence from him was, "My Lord, the main target of the enemy's ambush seems to have been our warhorses."

The general felt things go dark in front of him.

"What did you say?!" Zim immediately shrieked, "In the eyes of those country bumpkins, I, with my incomparably noble blood and high status, don't even match up to a group of BEASTS?!"

The captain looked pained, "It seems so, my Lord."

"Those wretched bumpkins! Plebeians smelling of horse shit! I'll definitely capture them myself, and cane every one for ten days before hanging them on display at my castle gates! I want everyone to see clearly the consequences of belittling and humiliating me! Tomorrow morning, the army is to move at full speed. I'll destroy those peasants at their own dirt wall!"

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Richard camped a mere ten kilometres away from Zim, an audacious move. However, given the upper hand they acquired that night, he had no fear of the Viscount pursuing them right away.

Marching in the night required one to be familiar with the terrain. Besides, even if Zim really could pursue then ten kilometres was far enough to expend half the stamina of the troops. What lay in wait then would be another ambush. The Bloodstained Lands were a place Richard was extremely familiar with, and he had many eyes in the form of wind wolves prowling in the night.

Richard stood on an elevation in the base, surveying the trickle of troops still returning to base. The night wind felt cool and comfortable, giving him the urge to cry out. He had grown used to controlling the battlefield, and was now extremely fond of having every detail within his grasp. Every engagement gave him more and more advantages, allowing him to defeat the enemy completely in a single move.

This was a feeling of control. It came from his blessings of truth and wisdom, but more importantly it came from influence.

The darkness behind him split in two, revealing Phaser's silhouette. The girl's aura had strengthened quite a bit, enough even to surprise him. A quick detection spell told him she had already reached level 3! The spoils of war may have been great that night, but it still shouldn't have allowed her to advance so quickly.

Phaser was currently full of energy, able to use all her abilities. At level 3, she could fight head to head against level 6 warriors, and if the conditions were right— such as in the night or with a sneak attack— even level 10 warriors could die at her hand.

However, he still felt a slight aching feeling all over, as if he was being pierced by needles. This was the astute perception of his elven blood, indicating that this girl had the ability to pose a threat to him. This left him feeling confused; he was a level 11 mage, able to instantly cast a grade 3 shield that could withstand any attack from melee level 3 fighter. It also greatly reduced the damage from anyone level 10 or below. Despite all that, Phaser was still a threat?

He pondered the issue quietly, feeling that Phaser's battle might did not quite match up with the broodmother's description of her.

Right at this moment, the darkness began to flicker again, and Waterflower appeared at Richard's other side. Her hands were on her blade the moment she appeared, a cold gaze levelled in Phaser's direction.

Phaser seemed slightly startled, immediately retreating into the darkness. "Waterflower!" Richard scolded, "Don't scare her!"

The young lady hummed, not saying a word as she disappeared into the night. Phaser didn't slow her footsteps either, completely disappearing from his line of sight. Although the two had disappeared from sight, Richard could still use their soul links to identify them. The two had spread thirty metres apart with him at the centre, standing on each side. The three of them formed a straight line.

Richard had no idea what this situation was, but Waterflower had always stingy with her words, and there were even little changes in her expression. That hurried gaze he'd had on her just now did not allow him to discern anything from her face.

It was at this point that Flowsand walked over from the distance, seeming not to notice the strange atmosphere as she started reporting about the results of the ambush.

Given his two gifts, these numbers were already known to Richard. Still, he preferred that Flowsand verify them. The casualties and resulting change in power were left in her hands as well.

"Zim lost 150 men, with more than half his horses killed or injured. Only about a hundred of his horses are usable, while we obtained forty elite horses which can work as mounts for heavy cavalry. On our side, we sustained fifteen injuries and lost two desert warriors."

These results could be called exemplary, but Richard had already experienced countless battles. This ambush to him was just more of the same, only the beginning of a longer war.

Book 2, Chapter 173

A Battle Of Fury

Richard could not tell how the war would end up. His control was limited to the battlefield, and yet external influences and confrontation were the greatest of variables. There were far too many elements to war, and a grade 2 blessing of wisdom was not powerful enough to give him that much control.

Whenever this came up, Richard normally thought back to what Sharon had told him when he was still in the Deepblue: “Most of the time, adaptability is more important than planning.”

The troops returned to their stations in order, the injured looking for the two fallen clerics for treatment. Caesar had only followed Flowsand around for less than half a month, but even he was already a level 2 cleric who could cast weak cure spells. Although he wasn't worth paying attention to when planning, his help could not be disregarded.

Richard moved to the centre of the camp, commanding in a low voice, “All of you are to rest up overnight. We leave early in the morning!”

Setting up camp a mere ten kilometres away from the Viscount was proof of Richard's guts and arrogance. However, it was just as he had expected; Zim really wasn't in the mood to pursue.

Richard's army had managed to ambush the enemies despite tight security and wariness; it would be foolish to pursue when it was still dark. A day's march had left Zim with quite an impression of the area; without a guide who knew the terrain well, they could trip over themselves before they even found Richard.

That night had already added to Zim's trauma, and he definitely wasn't going to gather his troops to pursue. He was worried that sending his troops out would leave his base empty, giving Richard

a chance to return and pose a real threat. The Viscount didn't believe that Richard would truly dare to kill or even handicap him, but if that gutsy frontier knight did something else like getting a girl to have sex with him and get his bloodline, it would be a huge loss. It wasn't like such a thing had never happened before.

However, he began to have second thoughts. If Richard sent that amber-eyed girl, then he wouldn't mind being taken advantage of. But then he remembered what would come next. It would be an unspeakable humiliation to the great unicorn to have his bloodline in that damned frontier knight's lineage. Zim was immersed in a mix of panic and fury, his mind full of all sorts of strange thoughts. He couldn't sleep at all.

He paced around the tent, remembering everything he had seen and heard. He was filled with hot blood from time to time, wanting to wage a righteous war at Richard's castle, allowing the fool to see the siege techniques of a true royal. He had forgotten that his pull on Baron Fontaine had stopped even the foundation of Richard's castle from going up. Even if he didn't interfere, a mere base would take half a month to make. This was including the work of a great mage like Richard himself.

The subordinates who had followed the Viscount on this campaign had known him for many years, and had a good understanding of his temperament. The general responded appropriately to Zim's mood swings, but didn't take the youth's words to heart. He knew that the Viscount would be back to normal once dawn struck, returning the command of the army to him. Of course, Zim would still decide the general strategy.

Given the experience of the nightly ambush, the troops were far more guarded during the day's march. Thankfully, even if Richard had shown great prowess, Baron Fontaine confirmed that the frontier knight did not have too many soldiers.

The army quickly advanced, entering Richard's lands at two in the afternoon. Viscount Zim looked at the messy construction site

and the completely barren barracks, his face ashen.

The base was very crude, built of small wooden tents covered in water-resistant canvas. Only the two-floored building looked to be worth anything. However, the castle's construction site was now disorderly, with the stones not cut properly and the pit shallow. Even the wood had yet to be nailed in.

The Viscount's expected outburst only came after a period of silence, "Where's Richard?! Where did he go?! Isn't this his territory? His castle? The place that he has to protect with his honour and his LIFE?"

This is just a pit without even a castle. Although many had such thoughts, nobody dared to put them to word.

"Is Richard actually a noble?!" The first thing many people recalled at this question was Zim himself disdainfully saying that frontier knights and titled knights without at least two generations in the family were not true nobles. However, Zim was not one to remember his own words; or at least, he temporarily forgot such things for the moment. He pointed at the empty camp and roared. "BURN EVERYTHING HERE, UNTIL THERE'S NOTHING LEFT!"

All the soldiers darted forward. A moment later, a raging inferno swallowed the base. However, this place was little more than a well-equipped barracks; it made no difference if it was burnt. Richard's castle was a mere pit; even if Zim wanted to tear something down, there was nothing to destroy. The tiny sparks and fires did nothing to calm the fury in the Viscount's heart.

"The peasants! Capture all of the peasants!" Zim roared a new command. This time, even the guard captain did not act on it.

The general turned away to direct the soldiers who were trying to burn the pile of stones, and the captain walked over to Zim and whispered, "My Lord, Richard's territory is a barren land with a scant few people. If we want to capture those worthless scum, we'll have to divide our forces. Once that sly Richard..."

There was no need to say any more. Zim had enough common sense not to divide his forces so casually, especially with that frightening ambush that left him worried for his safety. Only with his army around him did he have confidence and courage.

“Then what shall we do?” the Viscount hummed, “We can’t find any signs of Richard.”

The general and captain gazed at each other. The former still remained silent, as the latter snickered at him and said to Zim, “My Lord, I have a few men who are proficient at tracking. Richard has many troops, so my people can definitely find them!”

“Then look for them immediately! Once we find them, the entire army is to attack!” Zim stated coldly.

Book 2, Chapter 174

A Battle Of Fury(2)

“Wait!” the general finally stepped out, saying in a low voice, “Once we find the trail, we can’t send the entire army right away. We’ll need to send some scouts to check first, it could very well be a trap...”

“Trap?” Zim didn’t seem agitated any longer, levelling a cold stare at the general, “Before we set off, you promised me you could defeat Richard successfully. Now, you’re telling me that my near two thousand elites can’t deal with a mere frontier knight who has less than three hundred soldiers? Is it so? Hmm?”

The general was left tongue-tied. No matter how powerful an army is, it only serves a purpose with the proper guidance... Of course, he was intelligent enough not to express that thought.

An hour later, the trackers had found traces of Richard’s army. Zim mobilised his entire army, starting a grand chase. The number of trails increased along the way, making the captain’s smile increasingly warm. However, the general at the side turned increasingly glum.

By the time night fell, the Viscount had chased Richard all the way to the common border between the Bloodstained Lands, the Sequoia Kingdom, and the Land of Turmoil. The terrain was very rough and complicated here, with caves, limestone formations, and small valleys everywhere. An army of a few hundred people could be hidden anywhere quite easily.

It took painstaking persuasion on the general’s behalf to convince Zim not to chase them through the night, instead setting up camp nearby. Richard attacked in the night as expected, and not just once, but their defence was much tighter than usual; the most he managed was to wake Zim up a few times. With the heavy casualties sustained in the first ambush, nobody dared lower their

guard.

The sleep-deprived Viscount struggled to put on his armour the next morning, needing the help of his attendants to mount his horse. Gazing into the distance, he suddenly saw a familiar figure. Despite their separation, he instantly recognised Richard's face.

Richard was perched on his own mount at that moment, watching as the army began to surge towards him from far away. He couldn't help but smile, speaking to Flowsand who was next to him, "I won again."

Flowsand hummed unwillingly before saying, "Let's bet again, this time it'll be about how long he'll pursue you."

"At least three days," Richard stated unhurriedly.

"With his stamina and perseverance? I'd say one."

"It'll be three," Richard smiled, "But you need to cooperate!"

Flowsand grunted an approval, "Fine, I lost this time. I'll resist with all my strength. Do you really have elven blood in you? You're such a violent fellow!"

"It isn't violence, it's conquest!" Richard corrected her, defending his actions.

Seeing Zim's army head over, Richard solemnly waved to the people behind him. Tens of barbarian warriors stepped out in a row, while the desert warriors shouted from atop the cliff.

"He's finally fighting like a noble!" Zim yelled excitedly, "Everyone, attack! I'll completely decimate him this time. See that? He has so many people on foot, and I've finally caught up!"

Looking at the warriors on the cliff, Zim immediately sidelined the general and directed the army in a three-pronged attack. Two mixed groups of infantry and light cavalry split off from the main force, moving to flank Richard and cut off his escape. The rest would charge straight on. Of course, he himself would be

supervising at the back lines from the safety of his personal guard.

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The battle had ended just as swiftly as it began, but it was poles apart from the hot-blooded noble battle that Zim had expected. Richard summoned six direbears at the top of the cliff, sending the thick-skinned beasts charging into the vanguard. The direbears weren't particularly strong offensively, but they had great endurance. The power behind their charges was astonishing, able to send the vanguard into chaos in a few moments.

When the right flank passed a huge stone pillar, they were suddenly subjected to a bombardment of flying axes. A dozen of the cavalrymen at the front were knocked off their horses. Before the team could recover from the chaos, piercing whistles rang out and another round of hatchets flew over, throwing the rest of their horses as well.

The soldiers finally saw their enemy, but they were left rooted to the ground. The throwers looked strange and inhuman, creepy enough to stun these trained soldiers for a short moment. They recovered quickly, charging forward with a yell, but all that greeted them was another round of hatchets.

The hatchets weren't like mere arrows, more comparable with javelins. The ability to block them was reserved for the heaviest of tower shields; the armour of these soldiers could not withstand their power. The wave of axes whistled past the troop, leaving a hole in the frontline.

What followed the axes was the thunderous sound of hooves and boots. A small team of twenty or so barbarians and desert warriors charged out from a rocky cliff, mercilessly cutting into the messy formation. The Viscount's soldiers fell in swathes, the right flank being dealt a devastating blow that left it on the verge of breaking apart. Many of the soldiers started to hesitate.

That brief moment of hesitance perfectly played into Richard's

hands, allowing his own troops to retreat quickly while escorting the throwers away. They made it very far in the blink of an eye.

As for the frontal assault, Richard had put his most mobile troops there. The desert warriors charged forward and destroyed the vanguard's formation, and right after that he led them diagonally through the battlefield to bore another hole into the gravely injured right flank. Then, they left as abruptly as they had come.

"Give chase! They have infantry, they can't escape!" Zim had paled with fury. The seeming panic in Richard's flight gave him a boost in confidence.

This chase lasted three days and three night, and it was the kind where neither party got any sleep. Richard escaped in the day and attacked at night, his energy seemingly endless.

There were many types of attacks. Sometimes a group of direbears suddenly appeared in Zim's camp, and on other occasions a barrage of fireballs assaulted them. Occasionally, Richard gathered all his troops and charged into the camp before fleeing quickly. There was even one instance where a warrior of darkness had appeared near the Viscount's tent. Caught unprepared, half a dozen of Zim's elite guards were done in by the fierce undead soldier.

Every attack brought about great losses to the Viscount's armies. At minimum he lost a dozen soldiers, but there were occasions where many more wound up dead. It was enough to cause heartache, but not enough to leave him scared.

Three days later, completely exhausted, Zim finally lost all interest in further chase. He actually had more stamina than most, granted an outstanding physique by his unicorn bloodline. Since even he could take it no longer, the ordinary soldiers were so fatigued they wanted to sleep for several days. At this point, there were less than a thousand troops left in his army. More than a third of his soldiers were lost, with his horses almost completely

wiped out. The soldiers may still be alive, but cavaliers without their horses were worse than footsoldiers.

Zim was now 200 kilometres away from Richard's castle, and nearly 400 kilometres away from his own. The Viscount suddenly realised that he had gone too far, and more importantly his army had grown weak. He passed down an order to return to Fontaine's lands, where he would resupply and await reinforcements from his family.

Richard was travel-worn as well, looking fatigued. However, his back was still as straight and tall as ever atop his horse, and his eyes twinkled brightly. Seeing the Viscount's army meandering into the distance, he flashed a slight smile and muttered to himself, "Trying to escape? It won't be that easy."

Book 2, Chapter 175

Catching The Prey

Richard spurred his horse forward, following closely behind Zim's army. Behind him were nearly a hundred desert warriors, a people who had grown up on the backs of horses. The full gallop of the over hundred horses was enough to shake the earth!

Zim watched the chasing Richard in a daze, finding it difficult to believe that this was the same frontier knight he had chased until he had nowhere to run.

Seeing the momentum of Richard's charge, the general's expression immediately changed. He abandoned the Viscount, rushing to the back of the formation and infusing his energy in his voice to roar thunderously, "Rear infantry, shield up! SPEARS RAISED!"

It took but a few moments for a thin but complete defensive line to form. The Viscount's army had been in a hurry, so they didn't have any heavy infantry. They also lacked the royal pikemen who were normally used specifically to deal with a cavalry charge. Unless they arranged themselves in an ordered formation that used their very bodies as obstacles, there was no way to obstruct Richard's men!

The desert warriors were born riders. Now equipped with the light armour from the Duke and the elite warhorses of the Viscount, their might had grown by two entire levels. Richard slowed his horse slightly, and the desert warriors flew past him one by one in a rush towards the disorderly enemy. The guard captain had shouted out at the same time as the general gave his own orders, commanding any infantry with shields to move to the Viscount's side to defend him. This left the army in complete chaos.

Richard had originally wanted to wait until Zim broke before

swallowing his army, but seeing the unexpected confusion he immediately raised his right hand. A bright flame shot into the sky, a signal for a full frontal assault!

The desert warriors all began to shout, spurring their horses on with their long, sharp falchions held high. THUD! THUD! THUD! Dull impacts resounded through the battlefield, the light infantry sent flying at their hand. The dozen or so desert warriors at the front were thrown off their horses from the impact. Their warhorses squatted down, while they themselves used the great inertia as they slid across the ground to neuter a few enemies who couldn't evade in time.

The barely complete defensive line was completely smashed apart. Those charging from behind manoeuvred around the obstacles despite the high speeds, breaking into the large hole in the formation. Their falchions flashed everywhere, the dazzling gleams leaving carnage in their wake.

A large group of desert warriors broke right into the centre of the infantry, beginning a wanton massacre. The defensive line was decimated, leaving a single unmoving boulder in the tide of horses.

That unmoving boulder was Zim's general. He was like a black-armoured wargod, his two-handed sword a lethal weapon that mowed desert warriors off their horses as they came. His helmet was already dyed red with blood, and yet his cries did not seem to weaken one bit. If it was just the desert warriors, the general would have become an unyielding hero who could save the impossible situation.

However, the rest of Richard's army had arrived.

Several dozen metres away, Richard reined in his horse as he gazed coldly at the bloodbath around the general, "Medium Rare, stop him from the front. Tiramisu will support you. Gangdor, move behind him and attack his legs. Olar, help them with your warsong. Zendrall, curse him again and again until you succeed.

I'll cut off his escape."

Every order pushed the general further towards the abyss. The man found that he didn't lose to the trolls' axes in terms of strength, but behind him was an agile, sturdy brute whose every attack held mountainous power that eclipsed even the trolls! More and more cracks started to cover his two-handed sword, the weapon that had accompanied him for many years actually growing difficult to control. Zendrall's curses were taking effect.

It took no time for numerous fierce enemies to surround the general. He was level 14, but each of his opponents was just as powerful. With all of them fighting him at the same time, he knew he wouldn't be able to hold on for too long. He thus gave up on the rear immediately, preparing to retreat to his troops.

However, Richard had been observing the situation. He took out the Book of Holding the moment the man made his move, the power of magic surging out from within. Just as the general knocked Gangdor back, he found to his despair that six direbears with thick, coarse fur had suddenly appeared in front of him.

BAM! In the midst of all the chaos, a heavy punch landed on the back of the general's head; the immense force immediately smashed his head into the ground. Medium Rare then jumped high, his large body that weighed hundreds of kilograms aimed to crush the general upon landing.

Richard's heart twitched. "Keep him alive!" he yelled quickly, but it was too late. The troll's huge buttocks crashed into the general, crushing his body.

"No..." Richard covered his eyes...

Once fifty throwers made their way over, the situation changed dramatically. He ordered them to unleash their toxic bone axes, and the pale white blades drowned the ten remaining heavy cavaliers. These axes were heavy and sharp, more powerful than even metal hatchets. Once they cut through the plate armour and

touched the flesh, it didn't matter if the wounds were only light. As long as blood was drawn, the toxins on the blades would take the soldier's life in minutes.

The second throw of the bone axes sent twice the number of squires to their demise. Had there been enough warhorses, these armoured squires would have made for an excellent light infantry. However, off their horses they were fated for death.

The throwers quickly emptied their three bone axes and five hatchets, annihilating most of the Viscount's elite forces. The whistle of the axes had become every soldier's nightmare; even those covered from head to toe in plate armour could not block them.

The perfect attack had completely destroyed the Viscount's army. The guard captain had taken Zim and fled as fast as they could the moment the general went down. Some of the warriors followed, while the remaining abandoned soldiers gave up their resistance out of despair and surrendered to Richard. He left behind less than ten of his soldiers to watch over the more than 300 prisoners of war, having his army reorganise as he started a fervent chase for the rest of Zim's troops.

The chase took an entire day and night. Richard was like a wolf seeking its prey, prowling around it and taking a vicious bite every now and then. In the deep mountains behind Rooseland, this was how the wolves hunted prey that was much larger than them.

Fleeing the entire way, Zim did not realise that the pursuers had managed to force him to change his route. He was now nearing the Land of Turmoil.

Book 2, Chapter 176

Catching The Prey(2)

A while before the first light of dawn, Richard sat up from a blanket spread on the ground, ending a half-hour nap. He cleaned up his armour and equipment, calling on his party to separate from their army. He then mounted his horse, leading them on a full-speed charge into the night. A large group of desert warriors and barbarians crawled up from the ground below, continuing the chase of the Viscount's army under the lead of an elite wind wolf.

Richard was practically pressed into the back of his horse. It was still night, and at the speeds they were travelling at the frigid wind was painful. The team followed his mental route at breakneck speed; if nothing went wrong, he would intercept them in half an hour. The Viscount would be left with only his personal guard when they caught up; most of the soldiers would be lagging behind to stop the bombardments of the advancing throwers.

Richard's party was quite small, with only a few important people. There were already dozens of wind wolves lying in wait at the interception point, and even if Zim showed heaven-defying ability and somehow broke through the ambush, the broodmother was waiting only a few kilometres away. The Viscount's fate had already been decided.

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Dawn had just arrived when Zim caught sight of Richard. The Viscount's face paled, his lips trembling without the ability to say a word. The guard captain beside him grimly shot a glance at Richard's small party, and his eyes suddenly twinkled as he whispered into Zim's ear. A bright red immediately rose on Zim's face, and his signature piercing voice rang out, "Right! He doesn't have a lot of people anymore, and our numbers are several times of his! There's no need to fear him, CHARGE!"

Richard looked to his left and right in an easy-going manner. The only ones with him were Gangdor, Waterflower, the two trolls, Flowsand, and four of the strongest barbarians.

While it was indeed difficult to find mounts that could carry the trolls and barbarians, both races grew in the wilderness. They had amazing stamina that didn't lose out to that of a horse in a long-distance run. Zim had assumed Richard would be slowed by his footsoldiers, but this was an infantry that he could never catch up to.

Zim still had nearly 30 personal guards by his side. His captain was level 10 as well, and judging by the huge advantage in numbers he decided to give it a last shot, going all out to carve a path of escape.

Richard gazed calmly at the Viscount's distorted expression. The strength of his perception allowed him to hear Zim's battle cry, "We have the numbers! Go, destroy them!"

He couldn't help the smile on his face at that. The Highland Unicorn wasn't completely stupid after all; knowing he could not win in speed, he decided to fight straight on and use his numbers to attain victory in a single go. Showing one's back to a great mage was a terrible idea; magic was always faster than humans.

But... does he really have the numbers? Having reserved most of his mana for this battle, Richard naturally had absolute control over the battlefield. He dismounted calmly, taking out the Book of Holding and casting the two grade 6 Nature's Beckon spells stored within. A wave of magic passed through the battlefield, spawning twelve direbears between him and the Viscount.

Seeing the sudden appearance of the twelve direbears, Zim suddenly felt his mind go blank. Twelve direbears needed at least four or five grade 6 spells to summon. A great mage who could cast that many spells in one go was only one step from becoming a grand mage! Was this frontier knight he had been chasing all this

while actually be a powerful grand mage? The Viscount decided to punish his intelligence officer the moment he returned to his territory, and officially ask for reinforcements from the family.

However, the nightmare had yet to end. More magic flashed, and Zim now found six direbears each on his left and right. Now, there were a total of 24 direbears surrounding his personal guards. Just that alone would require great effort to overcome, but on top of that there were still Richard's fierce subordinates to consider.

When the bears began to growl at him, the Viscount did the only sensible thing— he fainted.

Zim was actually lucky. He hadn't noticed the dozens of wind wolves appearing behind his men.

The captain of the guard noticed the pack of wolves that had just appeared around them, instincts telling him that these were Richard's summons as well. He then took a look at the unconscious Viscount, quickly choosing to surrender. Thankfully the wind wolves and direbears were all under Richard's control, or it would be a one-sided massacre.

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When Zim slowly opened his eyes, the first thing that entered his vision was a face that he had seen in his nightmares in recent times. He immediately screeched loudly, his voice so sharp it was like that of a little girl being raped.

The sudden, resounding cry left Richard shocked, causing him to split up in laughter as he watched the man crawl backwards. Seeing the terror in that expression, Richard couldn't help but touch his own face and wonder if his Archeron bloodline had awakened. Did he now have the face of a demon lord?

“Don't— don't come over! Don't remove my clothes!” The Viscount's shouts caused Richard's expression to change rapidly. The man's enslaved guards and even Richard's own entourage

started to look at him with an unknown meaning in their eyes.

The nobles of Faelor normally played with every kind of thing in their youths. One of the freshest things to play with was people of the same sex. This wasn't the only interpretation of the scream, but it was one of a select few. Had Richard been screaming, things would have made sense. However, Zim's shrieks made his personal guard think Richard's tastes were rather unique.

They couldn't help but think back to when Zim had returned to his territory. He had gathered his personal forces as fast as he could, too impatient to wait for the powerhouses sent by his family. This current behaviour only cemented a few of the guesses these people had made as to the interaction between the two. Zim had already executed the entirety of his escort from that day in secret, so nobody knew the true situation.

Richard didn't need to turn back to know there was a half-smile in Flowsand's eyes. Feeling slightly embarrassed and angry, he yelled for Zim to shut up. However, that caused the Viscount to just grow louder.

He promptly made a decision, having Gangdor lift the Viscount and tie him to a barren tree. The guards, who were about to see everything, started to look terrible as they began worrying for their lives.

Zim kept shouting, scolding, threatening, and begging throughout the entire process. "You can't kill me, Richard!" was the most common sentence, "I'm the Highland Unicorn..."

Eventually realising that those claims had no effect, Zim then started to bring up the statuses of his mother and father. When Gangdor began to strip him of his clothing, he completely broke down and started mentioning Duke Grasberg. He promised Richard that, as long as he would let him go, the Duke would give him more benefits than the Direwolf Duke. In his anxiety, he even promised the position of a Marquess.

However, Gangdor had already prepared the whip and opened up the wine pot by his waist, soaking the whip in alcohol.

Book 2, Chapter 177

Pursuit

“You’re currently my prisoner, Zim,” Richard said with a smile.

“Yes. YES! That’s right, I can pay ransom! Just tell me how much you want. My family is very rich, just let me go and you’ll be paid! You’re a real noble, aren’t you? You’ll surely abide by the laws of nobility? Don’t kill me, don’t kill me!” By the time Zim reached the end, he was wailing. In the deep, dark forest, his pale body grew even more dazzling.

“Of course I want a ransom,” Richard said slowly. The sentence immediately relaxed the Viscount’s pent up nerves, but then the suppressed fear burst forth in the form of tears.

“However...” Richard’s single word immediately stopped Zim’s crying. He pressed so close to the Viscount that their faces were less than twenty centimetres apart, enunciating every word, “I need you to remember my face and name. I told you last time, but it seems like you’re memory isn’t all that great. I should probably help you strengthen it a little.

“How many lashes did I give you last time? More than ten, right? Oh, you see, my memory isn’t all that great either. It will be double the number this time. Thirty lashes, maybe that way you won’t forget who I am.”

The whip in Gangdor’s hand rose like a poisonous serpent, lashing onto the Viscount’s back to leave a swollen mark. Zim cried out loud, his entire body twitching and squirming as he lost continence.

Richard took a few steps back and leaned against a large tree, resting his eyes as he silently counted.

Gangdor knew Zim’s limits. The lashes never overlapped, nor did he ever draw blood from the bruises. The internal clots would

sting the young Viscount's nerves further, leaving him in even more pain. The lashes seemed to cover his entire body, but there were no serious injuries anywhere. The groin, especially, wasn't touched.

By the time the punishment was done, Zim was left a moaning mess that couldn't take a single step. Flowsand had to cast several healing spells on him before he could barely lie on Gangdor's back, carried out of the forest.

Everything had been settled in a single battle, so there was no need for the broodmother. She returned to the Land of Turmoil, but before doing so she reminded Richard once more that she needed large amounts of magic crystals or any other sources of energy to strengthen herself.

There wasn't much Richard could do regarding those requests. Magic crystals were a rarity in any sort of plane. Simply put, these were extremely pure crystals that could hold large amounts of mana. The broodmother needed more and more magic crystals to upgrade itself with each level; now that it was already level 4, each grade 4 ability needed forty magic crystals to activate.

She was beginning to show her prowess as a war machine. Once the throwers reached a certain level, their power would increase geometrically. However, the more powerful they grew the more energy it took her to make them. Richard had already invested what was basically the entire wealth of a baron to bring her to level 4, and he could already see that even a Duke's wealth would not satisfy her in the near future.

If she had no limit to her growth, or the limit was at least very high, she could perhaps require entire planes to support herself one day. Richard frowned at this thought, something fleeting flashing across his mind.

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With Zim and his personal guard now prisoners of war, Richard's

party met up with the rest of the army. This war that had lasted several days had completely annihilated Viscount Zim's army. Over a third of the army was dead, another third was injured, while the rest had surrendered.

Richard had no plans on raiding the camp of the wounded soldiers; doing so would only burden him greatly without getting him much in the way of additional ransom. There were dozens of elite knights in those four hundred wounded soldiers, but even combined their value couldn't compare to Zim's.

Richard's army took some time to rest, setting off the next day with twice their number in prisoners. He and Flowsand travelled side by side on their way back to his territory, with Viscount Zim on horseback not far away, squeezed between a few knights. The Viscount was the only one among the prisoners with the luxury to ride a horse; the rest had to walk. However, with the knowledge that Richard planned to collect a ransom, they were no longer filled with anxiety.

Flowsand frowned with her gaze on Zim's back, and she said softly, "I don't like this guy."

"I actually rather like him," Richard responded.

"I can tell that he hasn't given up completely. If you let him go this time, he'll be causing trouble for us right away. Will you give him sixty lashes next time? Wouldn't it be the same to kill him right now?"

"Isn't it a good thing if he wants to cause trouble?" Richard asked with a smile.

"A good thing?"

"Of course. With Zim's personality, he'll definitely stop others from causing trouble for us until he gets his revenge. I'd rather have him as an enemy than most others."

That explanation left Flowsand shocked. She stared fiercely at

Richard, “Sometimes I feel like you’re becoming a sly old fox!”

“If we’re talking about scheming,” Richard said with a snort, “you’ve always been better than me.”

Flowsand straightened up, putting on a pure and innocent expression, “I spent my entire life in the church. I don’t know anything.”

Richard ground his teeth at her actions. If they weren’t on the road, he would have pushed her over for a long ‘fight’ right then and there.

For some reason, this reminded him of Sharon. Pretending to be innocent, kind, and pure... The legendary mage was quite suited to such a thing. However, once the thoughts started he couldn’t keep an inexplicably sour feeling from welling up in his heart. He hadn’t dared to think of her when he first came to Faelor. At that point, he didn’t know whether he would even be able to return to Norland.

Only now that he was through the initial crisis, with a ray of hope in returning to Norland, did Richard dare to allow these memories to surface from the deepest corners of his heart. However, Flowsand did not notice the slight change in his mood. She was deep in thought over something, and only looked up to speak after some time.

“So, about Perrin. What are you planning to do with him?”

“What I’m planning to do?” Richard was startled. He hadn’t thought of this question before.

“Perrin’s a real genius,” she said seriously, “If we receive the grace of the Eternal Dragon and lift his curse, he could finish the foundations of magic mathematics. Faelor isn’t much weaker than Norland. If their magical abilities go one step further and they start acquiring resources from other planes, it could rise to become a new primary plane. Although it’s an extremely slow process,

even the possibility is frightening.

“Forget that, even the immediate consequences are dire. He doesn’t have many accomplishments in magic due to the divine punishment right now, but once that is taken away his accomplishments will be limitless. Someone who can lay the foundations for an entire field is an extraordinary genius! If we don’t deal with him, he could become our biggest enemy on Faelor in a mere ten years!”

Richard was finally forced to face the problem Perrin posed. The youth was the key to their return to Norland; only with his father’s support could they obtain the offerings needed to summon the dragon. However, just as Flowsand had said, that process would birth one of the most terrifying enemies they would ever face.

Richard mulled over it for some time, speaking slowly, “Flowsand, you know the Archerons have many enemies and there are numerous people who are willing to pay a hefty price for our lives. Take the Josephs, Mensas, and Schumpeters for example. Their interference with our expedition is a typical example of how far they will go. Do you think it was worth it for them?”

Flowsand hailed from the Church of the Eternal Dragon, so she was naturally familiar with how much of a sacrifice such a thing could cost, “So far, they’ve lost quite a bit. They had to send us to Faelor, and then move Sinclair and the bearguard knights. The resources they gave up would have been enough to acquire a lesser plane. If their luck wasn’t too bad and they put in the time and effort to develop it, the earnings from that plane would definitely exceed the investment.”

“Exactly,” Richard smiled, “Say I wipe Perrin out. Maybe one day in the future I’ll have to wipe out someone else just like him. There are a hundred million humans alone on Faelor, forget the other races. Geniuses are born all the time, should I kill them all one by one?”

“The truth is, strength is the best way to take care of them. My enemies today won’t qualify for my attention tomorrow. Think of it like climbing a mountain; some people want to pull others down, while others wholeheartedly focus on getting to the top. Those who always want to pull others down to their level will never get the chance to reach the peak.”

“But...” Flowsand frowned, “What if someone like Perrin grew to be stronger than us? Wouldn’t we regret not eliminating him when we had the opportunity?”

“Even if Perrin grows, I’ll stay higher than him as long as I keep my eyes on the top. You should know this; are there any things in life that don’t require a price?” Richard returned the question with a smile before following up with:

“I’d rather aim to be the best and end up middling than aim to be mediocre and end up at the bottom.”

Book 2, Chapter 178

Ransom

With less than a quarter of his enemy's numbers, Sir Richard Archeron had completely annihilated the invasion of Viscount Zim, the Highland Unicorn. This feat immediately gained him some fame in the Sequoia Kingdom.

A few days after they returned, hundreds of men and dozens of carts of lumber and stone reached Richard's territory. They were all from Baron Fontaine, a part of Zim's ransom. The young Baron was now obligated to keep Richard supplied at low prices.

The fact that the Baron immediately sent everything over without objection after receiving Richard's letter verified Richard's conjecture—he had defected to the side of Duke Grasberg and Viscount Zim.

This caused Richard to raise his evaluation of the Viscount's aides. Even in the midst of the military action, they had taken into consideration Baron Fontaine's territory and made use of its location to block communications between Richard and the Direwolf Duke. This prevented Duke Bevry from intervening in advance and also blocked Richard's escape route; these were decent tactics. However, decent was only decent; victory in such a huge operation would have gained Zim nothing, but the potential losses were immense. The fellow had acceptable tactics, but lacked the vision for strategy. Of course, it was possible that whoever did this actually did understand strategy but just couldn't employ it under the Viscount's rule.

All that didn't matter now. Regardless of whether Fontaine now served Grasberg or Bevry, he still had to become Richard's supply base.

Once the labourers and materials arrived, Richard could finally start construction on his castle. He headed to the construction site

every few days to inspect the progress, occasionally making adjustments to the blueprints. The basic form of the castle would be completed in four days, and when the time came he could look into decorating the interiors.

Not waiting for the construction to complete, Richard sent out numerous emissaries to turn the gold on his hand into battle strength. Outside of lumber and stone, he bought large quantities of rations and high-quality weapons. Fontaine had been reluctant to supply weapons at first, but Richard brought up Zim's ransom to change the situation. Because of that, the young Baron ended up having to supply the best quality of equipment for 200 elite footsoldiers at a low price.

The rest of Richard's envoys headed to Bluewater Oasis, where many of his old acquaintances were located. It took a mere few days for them to return, coming back with the latest news from the Bloodstained Lands.

Although Bluewater had suffered massive losses under Sinclair's short tyranny, that was just a loss of manpower. The soil and buildings were still undamaged, and in the blink of an eye she had met her end at Twilight Castle. All the organisations that had ruled before immediately regained stamina, taking over the oases once more. However, not all of them had suffered equal losses; some were practically unharmed, while others had suffered greatly.

The delicate balances had been tipped. Every organisation wanted different things when it came to the new distribution of power. Some of the larger oases were in imminent peril, about to face a civil war at any point. The human kingdoms bordering the Bloodstained Lands were eyeing immense benefits as well.

The situation greatly increased the price of slaves, weapons, magic crystals, and magic artefacts. On the other hand, the prices of minerals, raw materials, and any other precious good had fallen instead. Richard had wanted to employ a mercenary group to defend his territory, but now he found that their prices far

exceeded his expectations. An increase in the price of cannon fodder was a great indicator of imminent war.

Richard stayed in his territory for a few days, extremely busy. He had to reorganise the rest of the troops, and the new desert warrior and barbarian slaves he had acquired needed to grow used to working with the wind wolves and throwers. They also had to learn to understand and obey the elite wind wolves, who communicated through physical actions and howls. The two wind wolves would relay orders from Richard himself.

Just organising the training took most of Richard's time every day. Thankfully, a few days of intense training allowed the new troops to begin integrating into the singular body of his army. With the first steps taken, his army had strengthened once more.

At night, Richard would clear his mind and craft runes. Most of his time was spent on the grade 2 penetration rune, and when he ran out of energy he moved on to restoring the damaged runes from the bearguard knights. The task was simple enough not to require too much precision or mana control, so he could complete them on instinct. This kind of work that wasn't complicated was basically his rest. By the end, he managed to recover two runes that were almost completely intact, one for strength and the other for defence. He also restored three sub-par strength runes and one for defence.

Time passed rapidly with his packed schedule. It wasn't long before an emissary from the Direwolf Duke arrived at Richard's territory.

This was the same envoy as before, the middle-aged titled knight called Chanton Nottling. Following him this time were thirty knights and over a hundred footsoldiers, as well as dozens of carriages filled with supplies.

Once they were done with the pleasantries, Sir Chanton immediately asked to see the imprisoned Viscount. Richard agreed

gladly, because this was the Direwolf Duke making his stand clear. Bevry knew what had transpired, and would take care of any hidden threats.

With the Direwolf Duke acknowledging that his vassal had only been protecting his territory, Duke Grasberg would have no choice but to abide by the rules of the kingdom. He would have to pay a sufficient ransom for Zim's trespassing, and any revenge would be limited to prevent a direct war between the two Dukes. In principle, the three Dukes of the kingdom were not allowed to directly wage war, or the royal family would intervene.

Zim was trapped on his own in a courtyard with a wooden house. Outside of being disallowed from leaving the courtyard, he was free to move around as he pleased. There were even arrangements for a young maid to stay there and take care of him.

Chanton took a look at Zim's location, having a word with him and listening to his complaints attentively for an entire ten minutes. Zim beleaguered him about not getting the treatment he deserved. He wanted a dozen maids, more than ten main courses for his meals, and the like. When ten minutes had passed, Chanton abandoned the blithering Viscount and instead accompanied Richard to the imprisoned soldiers.

These 400 slaves weren't treated as well as the Viscount was. The guard captain, the rest of Zim's personal guard, and any low-ranking officers had been squeezed into a single wooden house. The rest of the soldiers were all crowded in tents. All weapons and armour had been confiscated, and there was a fence restricting their movements. Archers were posted on a nearby tower; if they so much as stepped outside their bounds, they would be shot dead without mercy.

The camp wasn't large in any means, leaving all the prisoners congested. Sir Chanton took a round around the camp, conversing for a short while with some of the prisoners before he left for the accommodations Richard had arranged for him.

Book 2, Chapter 179

Ransom(2)

Chanton suddenly spoke up on their way back, “Sir Richard, why are you only giving the prisoners half a portion of food? That goes against the customs of nobility.”

Richard had expected this question, so he waved his hand as he answered directly, “My own men number less than half these prisoners. Restricting their food is just a precaution; if they don’t eat enough, they won’t have the energy to run. I know this doesn’t quite match noble tradition, but it’s a special circumstance. Besides, isn’t it enough for Viscount Zim to be fed well?”

The titled knight nodded in approval, continuing solemnly, “Richard, this is a personal suggestion. No matter what you feel about Viscount Zim, do your best not to harm his body. In the last four generations of the royal bloodline, he is the only one to have awakened the blood of a powerful sacred beast. He is extremely important to the royal family. I’m informed that His Majesty and the elders have plans for him to leave at least twenty children behind.”

“So I should let him just attack my territory?” Richard retorted.

“Did you?” Sir Chanton wasn’t someone so easily deceived. The answer he gave with a smile left Richard speechless for a moment.

Indeed, he had won both clashes with Zim completely, and he was the one who had egged the Viscount on. Just as he had told Flowsand, Zim was an enemy that was hard to come by.

Chanton didn’t press much further, “As long as you avoid hurting his body, you will not hit the bottom line of the royal family. Your clash with the Viscount will remain a purely personal grudge, and Duke Grasberg and the royal family will remain neutral and not intervene. The worst case is for Earl Yatu to enter

battle, but I don't think he'll do so publicly. At most, he will sponsor Zim's war activities in secret.

"Looking at your ability, Yatu may be a threat but he can't shake your foundations. As well, the moment he joins the battle you'll have the right to invade his territory as well. I don't think he wants that," Chanton said with a chuckle, "Viscount Zim's territory is well known for the daffodils, while Earl Yatu's lands are known to have a lot of lafite steel."

Richard nodded at the Knight, "Alright, I know what to do. I won't yield easily in the ransom discussions."

Chanton's residence was a single two-floored wooden building. It was a temporary construct just like Richard's own, and seeing how desolate Richard's lands looked the Knight didn't get fussy. He cleaned himself up before inviting Richard to the drawing room for some afternoon tea. The black tea and even the snacks had been brought by the Knight himself, and looking at how he handled the tea he seemed to enjoy the activity greatly.

Once the tea was served, Chanton had the servant leave the room. He then produced a letter, passing it to Richard. "This is a letter for you, penned by the Duke himself."

Richard opened the envelope to find two pieces of paper enclosed. Bevry started off with a polite greeting as per etiquette, before mentioning the relationship between the three dukes and the royal family.

Duke Grasberg had royal blood in him, making him a natural ally of the royal family. The Direwolf Duke and the Duke of Tulips were occasional allies, united by a common interest against Grasberg and the royal family. However, the royal family clashed with all of the dukes on occasion, which was why politics was extremely important in the Sequoia Kingdom.

The royal family was in power on the basis of their unique and mysterious bloodline abilities. However, their bloodline had

thinned from generation to generation. Zim's appearance was very important; if he succeeded in having children with powerful bloodlines, then the royal family would nurture them with care to bring up a generation of powerhouses that would guard the kingdom. The Duke mentioned, however, that it was something that could only be accomplished in two or three decades. Reading between the lines, he was hinting that someone who only had a chance to become a guardian, and that too only in decades, had no ability to change the current situation.

Richard understood exactly what Bevry was saying. Zim himself was good for nothing, completely useless. The chances of him having a child with a bloodline ability, and that child then growing up to be powerful enough to defend the kingdom, about the level of a saint from Norland, were less than 1%. Richard didn't even bother himself with a genius like Perrin, so why would he kill Zim over the minuscule possibility of a future saint?

He continued reading the Duke's explanation of Viscount Zim's importance. Bevry obscurely mentioned that the royal family prized him for his bloodline, not for his reputation. Richard couldn't help but raise his brows, reading those words once more. They seemed to hint that there was no need to worry about a saint appearing to resolve internal conflicts.

The words on the back of the letter were even more interesting. Bevry hinted that the Viscount's existence was actually a burden to Duke Grasberg and the royal family, one that could not be harmed. This was, to some extent, in line with Richard's own thoughts.

At the end of the letter, the Duke mentioned that he had sent Richard supplies as payment for the next batch of runes. These supplies included four ballistae, as well as enough equipment to outfit 200 warriors. While the ballistae weren't enchanted, they were more than enough for Richard's crude little castle.

The Duke also mentioned that a battalion of 300 swordsmen was stationed not far from his territory. Nominally, they were to

impose a border on Richard's territory, but if there were any issues he could not deal with he could seek refuge there. The battalion would defer to him for some time, protecting him until he could reach Deepcliff City.

Once he saw that, Richard skimmed through the rest without halting. The second page was just a list of the supplies that Chanton had brought, as well as the steel components for the castle's defence that would be sent later.

Richard lit the letter alight once he was done reading it, burning it to nothingness. "I'm very grateful for His Grace's generosity!" he said to Chanton, "Is there anything else he wants to tell me?" There were many things that could not be written on paper.

"Yes," Chanton smiled, "His Grace wants me to tell you that he's preparing to go to war against the Whiterock Dukedom. The army will set out in less than half a month, targeting Earl Jayleon. The Duke's true target is a dragon skeleton displayed in the Earl's castle.

"Alright, that's it. Once you've taken inventory of the supplies, I will need to rush back to Deeprock City. His Grace needs to know Viscount Zim's current situation. Once the army sets off, I will send the second batch of materials."

"Thank you. However, I have one more question. How will the young Baron Fontaine be dealt with? He's currently blocking the path between my lands and the Duke." The Fontaines had cut ties with Duke Bevry, and were now sitting at a major crossroad. However, Twilight Castle was currently still too weak to defend itself.

Knight Chanton muttered to himself for a while and then said, "I have no personal advice for you. However, I discussed this matter with the Duke before I set off. He has given you full authority; handle it as you wish."

"Full authority?" Richard frowned. That was a very broad power.

“Yes, full authority! Do whatever you think is necessary to deal with the Fontaines,” Chanton repeated.

Richard frowned once more, understanding the hint.

Book 2, Chapter 180

Negotiation

It wasn't all that easy for Baron Fontaine to break away from being the Direwolf Duke's vassal, joining Duke Grasberg's ranks. Thankfully, Duke Bevry was about to go to war. He obviously wouldn't deal with the problem of the Baron anytime soon, especially since it concerned a special character like Viscount Zim. However, even if the Duke didn't mind for now, Richard had to step in.

With his barony being in such a key position, the young Baron was going to be a huge threat. Once Richard obtained the ransom and released Zim, he would have no bargaining chips to keep the youth at bay outside of his own military might. Zim's side may be peaceful for some time because of an agreement as the losers of the war, but the barony would soon be reinforced.

Richard didn't express anything to Sir Chanton, immediately taking his leave from the titled knight's residence. Returning to his own, he headed to the rudimentary laboratory to find a way to complete the last part of his spell penetration rune. However, no matter how many times he tried to concentrate he kept failing. Almost writing the entire thing off, he eventually just stood up and headed to the window for a view of the lush forest outside.

Every detail from the short period of interaction between him and the late Baron flowed through his mind. Twilight Castle was elegant and exquisite, dazzling in the old Fontaine's hands. The finest of details in the castle were still impeccable, showing the Baron's taste and meticulous care...

The wind brought along the fresh smell of vegetation with a hint of smoke. The smell came from the masons burning the shrubbery nearby, tainting this primaeval scenery with the scent of war.

'Your son is causing big problems, Fontaine!' Richard thought

with a wry smile. ‘When you handed Caesar to me, had you already foreseen this situation? But... I’d rather believe that you’re someone who does things based on intuition...’

His imagination ran wild for a long time before he slowly cleared his mind, thinking quietly to himself, ‘Alright, you win. I’ll protect the castle you left behind, and help your son root out the black sheep in your family. Bah, who let me owe you a life?’

At that moment, he suddenly didn’t feel like he was only two years older than his friend’s son.

With new determination infused in him, Richard’s mood settled down and he completed the grade 2 spell penetration rune in one go. He also fixed the rune slot onto his chest. Concentrated on his work, he had quietly transitioned from an elementary runemaster to a true runemaster.

Now, all he needed to do was wait; to wait for Zim’s family to ransom their people.

It took a little longer than expected, but when Earl Augen, Zim’s uncle, appeared before Richard with a caravan of twenty heavy wagons, he understood why the Earl was three entire days late.

The Viscount clearly understood his people. He didn’t panic in the least when he was told that his family’s envoy was late, proudly and arrogantly stating that they were bringing a ransom suitable for his noble identity as the Highland Unicorn. He claimed it would be eye-opening for a mere titled knight, finally remembering to at least call Richard by his correct title. However, Richard did not know whether to laugh or cry; he couldn’t help but wonder, was the Viscount’s family so used to paying ransoms?

The wagons were especially heavy, making Richard very curious as to what they contained. It seemed like these goods would be a part of the ransom.

Earl Augen had pale skin quite similar to Zim’s; this was a visual

cue of the Sequoia Kingdom's royal blood. The man had just passed forty years of age, his magnificent noble robes adorned with fine jewels.

The Earl had brought along a group of 300 men, all light cavalry from the royal army. This cavalry would possess shocking deterrence even against a duke's army.

Once he received the report, Richard brought along a group of barbarian warriors and throwers to welcome the incoming party. The Earl was sat high on his horse, the cavalry behind him already forming three rows. Their armour glimmered in the sun as they assumed position, ready to charge.

Behind the light cavalry was the Earl's own army. Although their red and gold armour was equally bright, one could tell at a glance that they had only chainmail and most of the soldiers weren't even level 5. This was worse than even Forza's elite troops, incomparable to the light cavalry that had an average of level 9.

Had this private army not appeared, Richard might have held Augen in higher regard. But now, he did not plan to lose to the man in imposition. He stopped his warhorse a hundred metres away from the earl, waving his hand behind him to cause fifteen barbarian warriors in heavy armour to fall into a steely defensive line. Behind them were about seventy throwers. These creatures who looked like troggs could not compare to Augen's private army in terms of looks, but only Viscount Zim who had personally experienced their terror had the right to say anything about their might.

Seeing Richard put on such an aggressive stance, Earl Augen snorted loudly and spurred his horse forward to the central point between the two armies. "Sir Richard!" he yelled.

"Earl Augen." Unlike Augen's deep and majestic voice, Richard seemed calm and easy-going. However, the cold arrogance in his voice would not lose out to Augen's.

Augen's anger clearly showed on his face. "Sir Richard," he asked coldly, "I still don't know which family you're from."

"Archeron."

The man lifted his chin slightly in response to that, stating proudly, "I have never heard the Archeron name anywhere in the continent."

"The Archerons were never famous, the family doesn't have a long history." Indeed, the Archerons weren't even a thousand years old. They couldn't be considered a storied family, but in a Norland that was constantly burning in the flames of war the most important factor when weighing a family was its military might. History only mattered when both parties were equal in power.

Augen clearly didn't know the differences between Norland and Faelor. He laughed coldly when he heard Richard's answer, "So you're a country upstart!"

Richard maintained a charming smile on his face from beginning to end. However, he had no intentions of being cowed. In the face of the provocation and humiliation, he made a single, indifferent reply, "Indeed. I'm just a country upstart who captured a viscount."

Book 2, Chapter 181

Negotiation(2)

Augen's face immediately turned the colour of ash. "SIR RICHARD!" he barked, "You're trying to provoke an earl!"

"A court earl," Richard poked coldly. This was Augen's soft spot; a court earl didn't even have as much territory as a titled knight. The fact that he had managed to gather two hundred soldiers and dress them up in flashy armour was an accomplishment. Of course, any hope that such an army would actually be effective in battle was just wishful thinking.

The man almost turned green at that point, having to use all his restraint to keep from whipping Richard's face. It was extremely foolish to fight a great mage; Augen had some of the shortcomings common of court nobles, but he definitely wasn't foolish.

"Do you want to start a war against Earl Yatu and Duke Grasberg?!" Augen roared.

"Earl Augen, do not forget your position! Do you even have the right to stir up a war? Remember what you're here for; if you want a battle, I will honour your wishes. However, let me give you a word of advice: I have no intention to earn any gold from you. A court earl is not worth much," Richard icily reminded him.

Internal battles between nobles were normally solved by war. Although many powerful nobles tried to suppress such things, strife could never be controlled. However, unless the warring families had a blood feud the loser could surrender without being killed. Besides, the amount of ransom depended on the value of the prisoner as well. Even if Richard didn't want to kill Augen, he could still easily maim him.

Augen's complexion flashed between green and white, no words coming to his mind. He wanted to order all his troops to charge,

killing Richard and his army with one quick move, but his rational side reminded him that the only ones who would obey such an order were his personal troops.

The 300-strong light cavalry belonged to the royal army. They were here on Zim's mother's behest, to protect her son. They had only been loaned to Augen to avoid Richard making unreasonable demands. If his orders threatened Zim's safety, the battalion would kill him first.

The Earl took several deep breaths to quell his intense anger. He then said coldly, "Now then, Sir Richard Archeron, are you here to discuss the ransom with me?"

"Of course not!" Richard laughed. Ransom was a word that always brought him joy, "Follow me, I'll bring you to Viscount Zim. Once we're done with that, we'll proceed to a meeting room to discuss the ransom.

"Just so you know, I don't have any premium tea or refreshments. Nor do I have china or oil paintings. Everyone outside of your personal guard should be a kilometre away from the barracks. Of course, you can send the supply trucks over first!"

Not long after, Augen had met the Viscount and confirmed his health. Zim's booming voice alone was proof enough that he was well.

However, the process of the negotiation held some surprises. Augen's anger did not seem to have dissipated. He was unwilling to budge on any aspect of the discussion, determined to duke it out with Richard. He even threatened to go back and have someone else take his place.

This unyielding attitude surprised Richard. Normally, the royal family should have gotten someone unemotional for the negotiations, especially for such a special prisoner like Zim. Bevry's words about the royal family considering the Viscount a burden were starting to make sense.

Augen's unexpected stubbornness caused Richard to reexamine the ransom amount. It seemed like he was near their bottom line, and had he had no wish to carry Zim around as a prisoner for much longer. If the Earl backed out and a new person had to take his place, more than half a month would pass before negotiations would resume. Time was currently of the essence.

Augen's final offer was 50,000 gold, 20,000 worth of magic materials, and twenty carriages of precious goods that were worth a total of 30,000. This amounted to 100,000 gold in total.

However, Richard had already seen the 'precious goods.' They were things like marbles, black sand, and golden silk. Such things would definitely meet an Earl's standards for a palace, implying Duke Grasberg had put some thought into it. Gathering all these things was not easy at all, and the conversion to gold had actually understated their value a little. Any honourable noble would be overjoyed at such a gift for the construction of a new castle.

There was one problem, though. Richard had no plans for luxury or comfort, only concerned with the castle's defensive capabilities as a fortress. There was no meaning to these materials outside of their sturdiness. His interest lay in the 50,000 gold and the magical materials, both of which could boost the strength of his army.

Richard examined the offer closely. Even with just 50,000 coins, he could have returns of more than 20,000 in a month. There was no need for further negotiation; his most pressing need was to participate in the disputes in the Bloodstained Lands.

In the end, the two finally made the deal. After paying the ransom, both sides signed a permanent truce. Needless to say, everyone knew that this truce would only hold until one of them was strong enough to start a war. The only meaning to this paper was that the Viscount's next ransom would start at twice the current amount.

The very next day, Augen took Zim out of Richard's territory. As

for the captured soldiers, they would be released in batches. It seemed like a happy ending for everyone involved, be it Augen, Zim, or Richard. Of course, the reasons for everyone's happiness were different.

For Richard, it was the gold and materials he urgently needed. Zim was elated to not be a prisoner any longer, returning to his lavish lifestyle. He could even gather a whole new army, trying to exact his revenge on Richard.

As for Earl Augen, he was happy to only spend 50,000 of his 80,000 gold budget through his defensive negotiations. The rest of the gold went directly to his pocket. He had taken a huge risk for these earnings; when he first heard Richard's threats, he had thoughts of giving up. Only the shimmering allure of gold had given him the courage to fight on.

Book 2, Chapter 182

Recovery

Once the matter with Zim was settled, Richard wrote a few letters that very night and sent a few quick-witted subordinates to Bluewater Oasis and Deeprock City.

One of the letters was addressed to Sir Chanton, telling him to send magic crystals worth 50,000 gold with the next batch of supplies. That was enough for a hundred magic crystals on the market, and with Chanton's ability he could probably get close to 120. This would be enough to give the broodmother three more grade 4 skills, and allow her to get to level 5 as well well. At that point, she would be capable of creating combat drones at level 10.

The other few letters were addressed to Devon, Amon, and Bivier from Bluewater. Richard needed a new batch of barbarians and desert slaves from Devon, as a large number of his current troops had already been granted the freedom. The barbarians were only fighting for him out of gratitude, helping out at a time where he desperately needed their support. However, it was only a matter of time before they would leave for their homeland. Their love for their ancestral plains was something poets waxed lyrical about in their writings.

As for Amon, Richard hoped for an official alliance with Marquess Anrick. He also wanted to employ a troop of elite swordsmen; the Saint Swordsman Rolf was not just famous for his swordsmanship, but also for his ability to train troops.

As for Bivier, Richard was looking for a batch of refined carbon steel and lafite steel.

Once all these resources were acquired, Richard would be completely out of funds, including all that he would earn from the restored runes that he hadn't yet sold. However, that destitution would be exchanged for an unprecedented, formidable military

might! This wasn't just fervently building up an army. No, Richard was giving it his all and betting everything on a single throw!

The scale of this army made it obvious that it wasn't meant for defence. Richard was looking like a complete warmonger, ready to seize what he wanted with weapons and bloodshed.

He could not explain this sudden impatience. Or rather, he knew deep down in his heart, but he was unwilling to admit it. Thoughts of Sharon, the Deepblue, and Mountainsea brought him great distress. The blessings of wisdom and truth didn't just mean that he planned everything carefully. These traits also imperceptibly influenced his state of mind. He could only stay calm when everything was within his control, and any changes were within his expectations.

Calmness was often just another word for indifference.

Having stayed too long on Faelor, Richard had almost forgotten everything about Norland. However, now that he thought about these things again, and the three promises he had made, he felt a fire burning in his chest.

He wanted to transcend the limitations of the planes. For Sharon, he wanted to finish the Deepblue Aria. He wanted to defeat all of the Archerons, to put his mother's tombstone on the peak of that volcano.

But what about Mountainsea? Had he made any promises to that aggressive and domineering young lady? Richard couldn't recall any, but he still felt like he had to visit Klandor just to see her ones. As for what would happen when they met, not even the gods could predict that.

Richard was terribly unsettled that night, but no matter how long a night was the sun would eventually rise. Without a wink of sleep to his name, Richard's eyes were completely bloodshot. His mind was still racing, analysing the topography for the potential distribution of minerals in his surroundings.

The next week passed peacefully, but the situation was continually in flux.

Fontaine behaved as expected, growing more harsh once Zim had left. Perhaps it was unintentional. But a batch of goods from Deeprock City had been hijacked under his watch. All the men carrying the goods were completely annihilated, with not a single soul surviving. Naturally, all the goods disappeared. Even though these were iron ingots without much value, the team had more than ten blacksmiths.

Richard kept a close watch on every one of the Baron's moves. Within a short week, his defence had been strengthened greatly. A troop of over 300 Golden Eagle swordsmen had been stationed in forts just outside Twilight Castle. It didn't take much knowledge to realise these swordsmen that were level 6 on average came from Earl Yatu's private troops. The Azure Deer seemed very enthusiastic in protecting his new subordinates. Whoever wanted to attack Twilight Castle would be waging war against the Earl himself.

As for the switch in Fontaine's alliance, the normally intense Direwolf Duke kept silent. This was proof that Bevry's strength was not great enough to decide the outcome. At the most, he could control Duke Grasberg's movements through politics. After all, even the Direwolf Duke could not fight on two sides. The Whiterock Duke was a far bigger monster than Grasberg, and he had no confidence in victory.

Sir Chanton had indicated in private that Richard could act whenever he wanted, but the unspoken understanding was that he would then have to bear the consequences by himself. Or most of the consequences, anyway. The Direwolf Duke was in the midst of an attack on Earl Jayleon; those dragon bones weren't of much use to him personally. Richard guessed these things were to be used as an offering. Perrin's importance to the Duke was quite evident; he was definitely more valued than Richard.

On top of that, even though Chanton hadn't mentioned anything Richard could guess that Bevry had been adequately reimbursed for Fontaine's switch. Thus, he would have to face the pressure from Zim's family alone.

The Duke had given him a safe haven in the form of that troop of swordsmen. Their duty would be to ensure he and Flowsand could return safely to Deepcliff City. As long as the two of them did not perish, the altar could be built and the Direwolf Duke could pay for the construction himself. However, that force was also indicative of Bevry's feelings towards subsequent developments. Using those swordsmen would mean Richard would lose all independence, no longer an equal party in negotiations. partnership with the Duke.

Thankfully, there was some silver lining in the midst of all this bad news. His allies in Bluewater had turned out to be more reliable than expected.

Devon had sent 50 barbarians and 300 desert warriors. Bivier had gathered all the metal Richard required, and even added ten ballistae and 500 bolts.

As for Amon, he offered a combat treaty; if Richard could successfully help Rolf defeat his enemies around Bluewater, he would be granted a seat in the Bluewater Council. The Venomous Scorpion Michla, with more than 500 soldiers under his charge, would be the first target. Amon placed a bounty of twenty coins for the death of each subordinate of the Venomous Scorpion, and ten magic crystals for Michla's death.

Magic crystals... Richard was increasingly starting to like those words.

Book 2, Chapter 183

Recovery(2)

Training the new barbarians and desert warriors took another ten days. Richard had to teach them to understand the new command structure and let them get used to the equipment.

When Sir Chanton arrived on schedule, he brought over the promised goods and some other commodities that Richard had requested. He urgently needed blacksmiths and enough iron for 200 suits of armour, shields, falchions, and boots. Fontaine had dared to rob the caravans headed towards Richard's territory before, but wouldn't dare to do so when Sir Chanton was in the group. Sir Chanton didn't have a high status, but everyone in the kingdom knew that he was a trusted aide of the Direwolf Duke. He also came from an ancient, powerful family. Besides, it wasn't smart to provoke a random noble either.

In the blink of an eye, Richard had 400 desert warriors and seventy barbarians. Even though they had more manpower, this army was significantly weaker per person than in the past. Besides inadequate training, there weren't any knights to take charge as captain, reducing their overall capabilities in battle.

Richard found some time to visit the Land of Turmoil, feeding the broodmother the 120 magic crystals. This allowed her to get to level 5 directly, and as per his wishes increase the abilities of her combat drones. Once the advancement was completed, she would be able to produce six wind wolves or four throwers every day.

When Richard rushed back from the Land of Turmoil, he was followed by forty throwers and two elites. He now had more than a hundred throwers under him, and as long as the elites were around to take charge there was no need for training. By very nature, they would be strict, disciplined soldiers.

When he returned to the camp, Richard headed straight for the

training grounds to continue training the barbarians and desert warriors.

Gangdor was wrestling with three barbarians there, his burly body glowing with the sheen of oil as his muscles writhed around like centipedes. The barbarians were grunting regularly, while he only roared on occasion. Every roar sent one of the barbarians flying, landing hard on the ground. In a collision of raw strength and muscles, the barbarians gathered around felt their blood boil. They erupted with fighting spirit, all hoping to be the next to join the battle.

When Gangdor spotted Richard arrive, he let out a loud roar and erupted with energy, slamming all three warriors away. He then walked towards Richard, evidently not having given his best in the earlier battle, “Boss! You’re back!”

Richard nodded, raising his head to look over the brute. With Gaia’s Force making him bulkier, Gangdor now stood at over 2.2 metres tall. He seemed exceptionally tall compared to Richard who was less than 1.8 metres. Once the force of his bloodline faded, he would slowly shrink back to his original height of two metres.

“How was the training when I was away? Did anything happen?” Richard asked.

The training and leadership of the troops had been passed to Gangdor. He hadn’t learnt any such skills in the Archeron death camp, just using the same techniques they had used on him here. This used to be the duty of the Archeron knights, but with all of them dead there was nobody else to pass this job to.

Waterflower wasn’t exactly sociable. Olar only knew courtly arts and things about nobility. As for the trolls, there wasn’t much to say; they salivated at the mere sight of the strong barbarians.

That left Flowsand, but she was far too busy nurturing two fallen clerics and the young Caesar. On top of that, she was decoding the God of Valour’s magic, researching spells, and spent nights with

Richard. She was a young lady, not a labourer who worked day and night, but her current workload made it seem otherwise. The only difference was that she was a labourer who could multitask.

“Not bad! These fellows are good at battles. As long as they have good food, some training will have them unleash a lot more of their potential. Their foundation is great!” Gangdor seemed very satisfied.

“Of course! They weren’t cheap!” Richard laughed. The slaves Devon sent over all had strong foundations, making them twice as expensive as ordinary slaves. However, this was upon Richard’s request. He had wanted to buy a batch of soldiers.

“Oh right, boss!” Gangdor suddenly remembered something, “The training over the last few days was rougher than normal, so we were very generous with the rice and meat. We’re running out of bacon; didn’t you say a few big trucks would deliver cheese and bacon when you left? It’s already been ten days, why don’t I see any?”

“The delivery isn’t here?” Richard was surprised, but his expression quickly turned sombre. He remembered these supplies were coming from Deepcliff City, having to pass through the Fontaines’ land. If it was so long overdue, then it was definitely hijacked by ‘bandits’ in the Baron’s territory.

Richard suddenly burst out into a smile, “These jokers have some nerve. They’re not even letting food supplies pass!”

Looking at that handsome, radiant smile, Gangdor suddenly felt a vague chill in his heart. However, the big man pretended not to have seen anything as he continued grinning, “What do we do now?”

Richard took a deep breath, his hands moving subconsciously. Even without a handkerchief, it seemed like he was cleaning nonexistent dirt from his hands. He squinted his eyes in the direction of Fontaine’s lands, speaking with enthusiasm, “We

prepare a caravan for them to rob!”

Ten carriages of goods left Richard’s territory under the guard of fifty cavalymen, following a remote path towards Deepcliff City. The fifty desert warriors were a powerful guard detail, and horse bandits wouldn’t dare provoke them even with twice their numbers.

The caravan took a remote, broken path. It was obvious the vehicles were loaded, leaving deep imprints on the path. Not long after the caravan left, a few men on horses appeared on the path. These scouts were completely covered in unmarked hoods, with no identifying marks and no way to see their faces. They got down from their horses and closely inspected the wheel marks, quickly getting up on their horses to leave swiftly...

At that very moment, Richard was meditating in a carriage in the middle of the caravan. A weak, magical light illuminated the inside of the carriage, lighting up the Book of Time in Flowsand’s hands.

There were three more people in this carriage: Phaser, Waterflower, and Olar. Their presence made the carriage appear even smaller, but after the painful lesson in the past, Olar sat straight even if Waterflower was nearby. He didn’t dare even sway, afraid of brushing against a corner of the girl’s sleeve.

The elven bard had recently grown closer to Gangdor, so he learnt some of Waterflower’s habits. This quiet and stern young lady relied a lot on instinct and intuition to do things, so regardless of whether a touch was intentional or not he would suffer the painful lesson once more. Besides, the atmosphere in the carriage was especially icy. The young lady’s eyes were closed, but a cold aura was radiating from her body.

Book 2, Chapter 184

If One Was God

Richard suddenly opened his eyes, looking at Flowsand who was still immersed in the Book of Time with a puzzled gaze, “You’re always reading the Book. Haven’t you finished it?”

Flowsand smiled in response, passing the book over to him with both hands, “Try reading it.”

Richard accepted and took a look through, but all he could see was balls of dazzling light. “What is this?” he asked in shock, “Were you always reading this stuff?”

Flowsand made a sound of surprise, clearly astonished, “You can actually see something?”

“It’s just balls of light, I have no idea what they mean,” he said with a frown.

This just surprised her even more, “Wait, use your divine grace to read it, the one you received from the ceremony to the Eternal Dragon. It should permeate your soul, try it!”

Richard frowned and followed Flowsand’s instructions, concentrating on gathering the Eternal Dragon’s grace. Surely enough, the constantly moving balls started leaving visible trails, faintly tracing out a divine text. However, the text was extremely blurred; he could only identify a few incoherent words with much difficulty, unable to understand their meaning. He wanted to continue gathering the divine grace, but a wave of fatigue suddenly hit him causing a loss in focus. All of the text disappeared instantly, and the balls of light soon followed. All he could see in the end was an empty page.

Richard was taken aback. He flipped through a few more pages, realising that every page in the Book of Time was blank.

“It’s blank?!” he exclaimed in surprise as he returned the book to

her.

“One needs to use the divine power of time to see the contents. You can see whatever you want,” Flowsand explained.

He could only smile at that, “We’re about to enter battle. Why are you so hardworking?”

“I’m researching a completely new divine spell. I’m about to figure out the last link, and it might be in time for this battle,” she said as she buried her head into the book once more.

“What divine spell is it that needs so much effort? It’s only a group of bandits.”

“You’ll know soon enough. Right, tell me before you start casting spells.”

“The spell works on me?”

“Of course. It’s designed for you!”

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The caravan continued on its bumpy journey, entering another uninhabited area. However, the desert warriors guarding it suddenly grew tense. They started to look around, their grips on their falchions growing tighter.

The ground started vibrating at that moment, the sound growing more and more pronounced. The experienced warriors immediately dispersed to form a perimeter around the carriages; they knew this was the sound of a large cavalry approaching.

The first cavalryman flew in from the foot of the mountains, and in the blink of an eye over 200 had rushed out before the caravan. The group all had simple, dark cloaks over their armour, concealing the style and crests of their equipment. Their faces were masked with raised hoods.

The faint murderous aura coming with every move was a clear

indication that this was a group of veterans. The leader stood out from the crowd, looking at the wagons and desert warriors before he slowly raised his hand and clenched his fist. This was a common signal among the knights of the Sequoia Kingdom: a command to kill every enemy.

This group clearly wasn't just here to steal goods. They were out for blood, not even checking what their target was carrying. The knights advanced in two groups, one on each side of the leader, slowly approaching the enemy. Their killing intent grew more intense the closer they got, a habit of experienced hunters. The intense aura would force the prey into a frantic flight, maximising their chances of victory.

However, the hood of one of the carriages was suddenly pushed open completely. Richard stood up from the cart, looking at the not-distant leader as he spoke with a wry smile, "If you're robbing me, shouldn't you ask what's in the wagons first?"

The knight lifted his hood, revealing a face covered in hard lines. He stared at Richard with his hawk eyes, his eyes immediately narrowing as he forced a cold sentence through gritted teeth, "Since you're here, the contents don't matter!"

Richard laughed heartily, "Alright, don't say stuff like you're so-and-so and I can't tell you later!"

The leader naturally understood the implications in those words. His face turned purple with anger, but the ridicule would not interfere with his intent to fight. He threw his raised arm down and roared, "FULL ASSAULT, KILL THEM ALL!"

Seeing the two cavalry groups speed up, Richard narrowed his eyes. Mana surged forth around him, his hand rising in preparation to launch a fireball. Although the fireballs wouldn't hit the enemies at this distance, he could still burn the ground to reduce their speed or change the direction of attack. Forces like these, somewhere between light and heavy cavalry, lost a lot of

their power when slowed down. At that time, his desert warriors could display their own horsemanship and combat skills.

It was then that Flowsand started chanting a rapid incantation completely in divine language. An indiscernible pale-gold hourglass appeared over Richard's head, rotating faster and faster until it was almost a blur.

Richard's entire body shook. He felt his mana surge violently, practically boiling over with its power. The fireball he was about to cast was interrupted, the small delay enough for the incoming cavalry to enter range.

A brilliant divine light filled his body, burning brightly like a flame. His mana went from boiling to flaming in the blink of an eye and... started circulating manyfold faster than before? An idea flashed across his mind and he suddenly raised both hands, his hurried incantations so fast that the words blurred together into a sharp whistle.

Whoosh! Whoosh! Whoosh! Fireball after fireball continually shot out of his hands. Eight projectiles were launched into the air in an instant, and that wasn't even the end of it!

The leader's jaw dropped open. One moment he was in the midst of directing the cavalry into assault formation, and the next all he could see was a sky of fireballs. He frantically wanted his subordinates to stop their charge, but he knew it was already too late. All he could manage was a crazed roar of despair.

As for the knights racing forward at high speeds, their eyes filled with fear. All they could see around them were fireballs! This was the most extreme display of magic; a miracle of beautiful destruction!

BOOM! The first of the fireballs exploded violently, the surging waves of fire instantly covering everything in a radius of five metres. It was followed closely by the second, third, fourth... all the way to the fifteenth! All of the explosions rang out in quick

succession, instantly forming an arc of fire ahead of the caravan. The constant bursts merged together into the sound of one complete, gigantic explosion!

The cavalymen could not control the charge of their warhorses, getting thrown into the sea of fire as they howled out loud. A scant few managed to barely come to a halt, but their comrades merely rammed into them from behind and sent them tumbling in.

All of the desert warriors were stunned. Thankfully they had received exceedingly strict training, so they had not recklessly rushed out to meet the enemy. However, the fire was so close it was starting to singe their hair. They had to use all their strength to control the frightened horses, stopping them from jumping around wildly.

By the time the flames fizzled out, a third of the incoming cavalry had been turned to ash. The rest were stopped just before the line, using all their strength to control their frightened mounts. Only those in the rear were completely unharmed. Faced with the grievous deaths and injuries of their fellow soldiers, they were thoroughly enraged and charged in without waiting for the flames to completely die out.

Richard had both arms stretched forward, stuck in the same posture since he launched the last fireball. His hair was blown back by a burst of hot air, dancing in the wind before slowly falling back to his shoulders. He felt a deathly emptiness in his body; in less than two seconds nearly 90% of his mana had flooded out of him. However, what he saw left him stunned. Sadly, there was no time to relish in that godlike feeling.

Book 2, Chapter 185

Outburst

Although the feeling of his mana leaving him so suddenly left Richard wanting to collapse, he did not forget that he was still in a battlefield where every second counted. He steadied himself by holding onto Olar's arm, sending a series of commands out in his mind.

Many thuds sounded out as the boards of the carriages were smashed to pieces by sharp axes. Groups of throwers leapt out, grabbing hatchets from within and tossing them at the enemy. A sharp whistle permeated the battlefield, and the hatchets spun and smashed into the disorderly cavalry. With less than fifty metres separating the two armies, the power of these axes was astounding. The armour of the cavalrymen could not hold up at all, and be it human or horse anyone hit by the axes was heavily injured.

The throwers' axes were unimaginably fast. Their minds would not be influenced by any external factors in battle, and they would not be intimidated no matter how many spells Richard used. The moment he gave the order, all the hatchets were thrown as quickly as possible.

The hundred throwers were at an optimum distance from the enemy; they sent out five waves of axes as fast as possible, the rain of attacks growing to be a terror for the vanguard. Words could not describe the emotions one felt when they saw hundreds of hatchets flying towards their heads. Once the five waves were done, less than fifty cavalrymen could stand.

The leader's mouth finally closed. He yelled out, having all his troops retreat.

"Trying to run?" A cold smirk rose on the corner of Richard's lips.

The desert warriors had long since moved to cover both sides. In the meanwhile, the throwers switched from their depleted tomahawks and all lifted their armour, producing the bone axes that were glimmering with a pale white lustre. Stopped by the elite throwers, none of them acted. They instead formed three files, slowly advancing forward. No heavy infantry could outdo them.

The knight captain had experienced hundreds of battles, and was immediately able to discover that Richard's side was the weakest of them all. Seeing the troops gathered at the frontlines, he knew it would be too late to escape. Desert warriors were known for their resilience; it would be near impossible to get away. Did it not make more sense to just charge through the formations of the throwers? Who knew, perhaps they could break through and capture Richard.

However, just as he was about to give the order, he found a towering figure standing at the front of the throwers, his axe level. There were no knights at the vanguard leading this formation, only Gangdor.

Although it was just one person, the captain showed a rare hesitation. However, that slight hesitation lost him his last chance. The hapless cavalry did not receive the next order. Some charged forward, others retreated, while yet more clashed with the desert warriors flanking them from the sides. However, they were completely surrounded.

Richard slowly raised his left hand, clenching his fist in the exact same way as the cavalry's leader had before. The desert warriors all shouted out their battle cries, hacking out at the cavalrymen with their falchions.

The moment the battle began, an elven warsong rang out to boost the strength of the desert warriors. The opposing cavalrymen fell one after the other, and no matter how much the leader shouted he could not stall Richard's momentum. Having witnessed Richard's storm of magic, their will had been

obliterated. In front of an opponent who did not lose to them in power and even bettered them in viciousness, they were instantly left at a disadvantage.

Olar continued the elven warsong, all the while taking opponents down with his bow.

Stuck in the desperate situation, the leader was like an injured lion that erupted with power. The large, blood-stained sword in his hand sent three desert warriors off their horses the moment they approached him, but even so he could see more of his own men were dismounted as well. Even without those trogg-like monsters attacking them, the desert warriors were ganging up on his men two or three to one and taking them down. He knew it was impossible for him to leave this place alive; Richard's attitude at the beginning of the battle spoke volumes of his bloodthirst.

Just like how he hadn't asked what was in the carriage when he began 'robbing' them, Richard didn't care for his status or backing. Everything was an open secret, with the superiors just pretending to be ignorant. Such were the rules of this 'noble' game.

The leader's grim gaze landed on one of the desert warriors, but at that very moment he felt a thread of chilly wind by his throat. Goosebumps appeared where the wind blew, and he yelled as he threw himself at the ground without care for his horse!

The dull black blade of the Shepherd of Eternal Rest was unremarkable even in daylight, but its might could not be underestimated. The tip of the sword suddenly flashed at the leader's neck, brushing across it to leave a terrifying gash between his neck and shoulder. Although the wound was serious, it had not been able to send his head flying like Waterflower had expected.

Still, the young lady reacted quickly. A quick turn of the blade and she cut downwards, but only managed to tear into his armour to leave a long wound. Even the second strike had failed to kill him.

Thud! The knight captain hit the ground loudly, rolling a few times to dodge a few metres away. Having put some distance from the girl, he supported himself as he resumed body stance before looking backwards. Only then did he see Waterflower nimbly standing on his horse's back. Was it this wild girl who looks so frail that nearly took his life? The man didn't have much time to be bewildered, however, as he suddenly felt a chill at his back. The tip of a blade erupted from his chest.

The fellow's throat gurgled some words, but he could not form a complete sentence. Looking down at the short tip, he did his best to turn around and look at the face of the person who killed him. However, he had barely turned sideways before a numbness spread through his body and the dark overtook his sight.

He never managed to see Phaser's appearance.

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Once the last of the cavalry fell, the short yet intense battle finally came to an end. Richard grabbed Flowsand quickly and asked, "Is that the divine spell you were working on? What is it called? Why have I never heard of a spell like this before?!"

"Outburst, comparable to a grade 6 divine spell. It can increase the rate of a mage's mana flow, also speeding up the flow of time in their body. How is it? Feels good, no?" Flowsand asked, pleased with herself.

"It's madness!" Even now, he was still blown away by that godlike feeling. An entire group of cavalymen had fallen easily at his hands! Such strength, such destruction, such control... It was something he had never imagined even in his dreams!

"Mm, as long as I'm around any mage can show unimaginable prowess. I shall be the lighthouse of all mages!" Flowsand proudly declared. However, under that proud little face of hers hid a craftiness difficult to sense.

Richard nodded several times, taking her words to heart. A divine spell able to let him use his entire mana pool in two seconds was definitely very powerful. With this and his own magic penetration rune, he could get rid of a grand mage from Faelor in direct battle! After all, even a grand mage could not take the might of fifteen fireballs exploding together, especially when they had the additional magic penetration property.

Book 2, Chapter 186

Reparations

The power of the Outburst spell didn't fade until a while after he was done with his spells. The increased flow of mana had combined with his vitality rune, his mana pool quickly restoring itself. Only once it was a third full did the effects of the spell vanish.

The average mage could normally use only a third of their mana in a battle. Once one's reserves fell below 50%, the chances of failure started to increase exponentially. When it dropped below a third, it would be difficult to cast even the weakest of spells. Thus, most mages considered their mana to be exhausted when they only had a third of it left. However, the Outburst spell actually overcame this issue and virtually increased every mage's battle might by half.

"Flowsand," Richard asked seriously, "How many times can you cast Outburst in a day?"

"In a day? You're quite optimistic! The spell takes a lot from me, so for now... I can only use it once a week."

"Once a week..." Richard was slightly disappointed, but when he thought things over it made sense. Such a powerful spell would definitely have its own limits. The more powerful something was, the more it touched on the might of the laws. In extension, one needed to use more mana. Flowsand was a mere level 10 cleric; she was already skipping ranks to use what seemed like a grade 6 spell.

"Can others use Outburst?" This was another crucial question.

Flowsand shook her head, "No. The spell requires me to coordinate the power of the Book of Time with the Lens of Time. I can do without the Book of Time once I'm stronger and have the divine power, but the Lens of Time will still be necessary."

Only then did Richard understand that this was a spell exclusive to Flowsand. Of course, that was unless he could craft that grade 4 rune. However, even when he became a saint runemaster in the future he wouldn't be able to create every grade 4 rune in existence. Outside of the massive amount of research required for each, many special runes had restrictions on them. For example, Saint Peter's divine rune sets needed the creator to be someone of strong faith.

And thus, Flowsand had grown from a core position in the group to someone irreplaceable.

A headcount once they started clearing the battlefield told Richard a total of 206 cavalymen had attacked them, all currently dead. Under the concealing cloaks was excellent plate armour, centred around a strong breastplate with the remaining part connected by chains. The design was unique and the work intricate, allowing for agility while not compromising protection. Although the armour had no insignia or other identifying patterns, Richard was already well-versed on Zim's family. He knew at first glance that these men were from Duke Grasberg's Golden Eagles.

Richard hadn't been in Faelor very long, but he had already experienced dozens of battles both large and small. All of his followers had ample experience in clearing up battlefields. They stripped the cavalry for all valuable items, not even leaving behind the inner armour. This was considered disrespectful in a battle between nobles, but since they pretended to be bandits they would die as such. That was why he hadn't asked them for their identity at the start.

The bodies were all piled into some of the carriages, while the retrieved armour and weapons managed to fill four of the carriages up nicely. The throwers' hatchets were collected as well; every batch was made entirely of stainless steel, and was rather expensive. A single hatchet was worth thirty sharp arrows. Another large harvest came in the form of fifty unharmed horses.

As for his own side, Richard had lost less than ten desert warriors.

It didn't take long for the battlefield to be looted clean. The carriages then turned back, returning to Richard's territory. A large number of horse carcasses were left behind, while the throwers did not return immediately either.

Olar turned back and asked Richard carefully, "Master, why aren't the throwers coming?"

"They need to feed," Richard said calmly.

Olar felt his entire body tremble. Although the word 'feed' seemed benign, it hid a lot of other meanings.

The throwers looked more malicious than troggs. If not for their unthinkable levels of discipline, even Richard's followers would believe them to be monsters. They normally didn't live in the same area as the normal soldiers, so nobody bothered with their food. It just seemed like they consumed very few rations.

Just feeding on horse carcasses wasn't very frightening. However, if Richard intentionally wasn't letting everyone watch it, that in itself was thought-provoking. What about next time? If they were in a desperate situations, what would these creatures eat?

The elite throwers had already estimated the number of carcasses, sending Richard a mental report. This feeding session would sustain their normal survival needs for an entire week.

Having received this news, Richard began to think it over. Even at level 4, the throwers were only slightly weaker than the wind wolves in hand to hand combat. Their long distance attacks were comparable to level 8s, while the elites could even compare to level 10. Another special characteristic was that a good feeding session would last them a week, while the wind wolves could only last two to three days. This meant the throwers needed fewer supplies, increasing their value further. If he could overcome his own

revulsion and allow them or the wind wolves to feed on enemy dead, their strength reserves would rise without limit.

‘Could this be considered an advantage of the broodmother’s troops?’ Richard wondered.

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The very next day, the victorious army returned to Richard’s territory. Gangdor walked over and pointed at the bodies of the dead cavalymen, asking, “How should we deal with the bodies, boss? It’s hot here, without a spell protecting them they’ll start smelling in an afternoon.”

“Same as we did at Bluewater,” Richard replied, “Clean them with antiseptic, and erect stakes on our border with Fontaine’s territory. Hand the bodies there— right! Remember to be thorough, and handle them with care. Don’t let anyone see something like their crests or insignias.”

“No problem, boss!” Gangdor agreed loudly, but then he suddenly remembered something and asked Richard, “By the way boss, their leader actually isn’t weak. He seemed to be level 13 or something, should I leave him to Zendrall? That frowning pile of ribs could get another warrior of darkness out of him.”

“Not a bad idea!” Richard nodded. It was necessary for one to use every resource they could in a planar campaign. Fortunately, Richard had Flowsand, the broodmother, and Zendrall. This way, every part of the enemy, body, faith, and soul, could be utilised to the utmost.

Luck was also a part of one’s power. It was normally the most important factor in an extended planar battle. Those who rose through the ranks depended on great luck. Richard’s own wasn’t anything special; anyone who could rise through the flames of battle amongst the millions was incredible.

Gangdor directed their soldiers to pick out the body of the knight

captain. There were two other level 11 knights in the attacking army, powerful enough to be titled, but among the Golden Eagles they were only lesser leaders. This legion was evidently quite powerful.

Book 2, Chapter 187

Secret

The barbarians and desert warriors worked together, moving all the bodies off the carriages. Zendrall sprayed some antiseptic medicine on them, before casting some spells. The corpses were drained of their moisture, but they didn't shrivel too much and retained their original appearance. At level 12, the necromancer could handle a whole slew of bodies at a time. He only needed five rounds to go through the more than 200 bodies.

The Necromancer did not approve of Richard's showing the corpses off in public. In his eyes, such a thing was pointless. Who would be frightened by a body? Richard should just have left them to him. These were obviously all veteran soldiers who had trained long enough to have sturdy bodies. They could become elite skeleton warriors in his hands, forming an army of level 4-5 beings who could wield sword and shield.

At his level, Zendrall could restrict the level drop from when his army was alive to only two or three levels. If he prepared meticulously and used a large number of supplementary potions, he could even avoid a drop in level at all. However, the resources such an act would consume would be immense, and it was only worth it when creating warriors of darkness.

Zendrall had not gotten high-grade materials in a long time, but Richard only smiled at his complaining. Weak undead creatures like skeleton warriors weren't anything in the mage's mind. Every mage could use spirit summoning spells, so using a few in small-scale battles was no issue. However, a larger number of undead would make it obvious that a necromancer was serving him.

Necromancy was a taboo on Faelor, comparable even to demonology and second only to planar invaders. It had taken much effort to blend into the locals, and he did not want to attract

the attention of the gods for a useless army of skeletons.

By this point, Richard had a much better understanding of Faelor's pantheon. Although he was indeed an invader from another world, his limited strength had marked him as an insignificant threat. Sinclair had come quickly on his heels, and given her many large wars with the allied armies of Ceres and Neian, she had inflicted great damage on the churches in the Sequoia Kingdom. Any eyes that had been following Richard had been attracted to her.

And now, the deal with the Direwolf Duke solved any issue of identity. There was no further news regarding the first intruder, and the people of the Whiterock Dukedom quickly forgot about any invasion by some insignificant force.

Richard was basically a mosquito to the gods. Annoying, but tiny. He would not be able to cause any trouble, and even if he went missing they would only assume he died in some dark corner. One would slap a mosquito if it bit them, but wouldn't care even if it flew away. The gods felt the same about him.

Richard returned to his residence. What he needed now was to meditate and restore his mana. However, just as he sat down the hurried sound of someone could be heard bounding up the stairs and Zendrall rushed into his room.

The necromancer erupted with fury at the very sight of Richard, "The leader's body doesn't have a soul at all! What do you want me to create a warrior of darkness from? I have less than five warriors of darkness left, do you want me to start fighting with just curses?!"

"No soul?" Richard was stunned. This was unusual. It took a few days of rotting after death for a soul to fade completely. Until then, the body would have some fragments of the soul left within. Necromancers relied on activating the power of these souls to turn corpses into undead.

The souls of the pious could normally head directly to their god's divine kingdom upon death, which was why necromancers needed to cast a soul-locking spell right away with such people. However, few outside of paladins would ever reach this level of faith. Richard had not seen the knight captain praying to anyone during battle either.

Richard thought back to the leader's death. After sustaining heavy injuries from Waterflower, he had been dealt the last blow by Phaser.

"Alright, I understand. I'll get to the bottom of this."

Only after getting Richard's guarantee did the necromancer leave. Corpses and souls of powerful beings weren't just materials to summon undead with; they were also necessary for him to advance.

"Phaser, come to my room," Richard ordered in his mind. Moments later, Richard's window opened soundlessly and Phaser flitted in like a ghost to stand before him.

Richard looked over this special unit who was covered in her robes, saying, "Remove your robes."

Phaser did as instructed, removing her robes and even the armour underneath. Outside of the natural armour of her body, she was completely nude.

He found her appearance strange. Phaser's body was vibrating quickly, a very good state in battle that would allow her to deal a fatal attack at any moment. However, right now all it served was to make her skin ripple like it was a body of water.

She had grown again from when he had last seen her. He started off with a detection spell before walking circles around her, comparing her appearance to the memory of when she had just been born.

The light that glowed in response to the spell was weak, but they

were stable. Shockingly, and in the span of a mere two battles, she had already grown to level 5! This was a horrifying rate of growth!

There were some changes to her body as well. She seemed much taller right now, already at 1.6 metres in height. He did not understand the use of this in an assassination unit. A larger stature supported more strength, more energy reserves. However, at a mere level 5 Phaser was far from filling out her physique for either. It would only mean she needed to waste more energy to conceal herself.

On the other hand, the coverage of her natural armour was starting to reduce, which was something he found difficult to comprehend as well. Phaser's natural armour was similar to the broodmother's shell, hard as steel with a quarter of the weight and much better flexibility. It was as good for defence as refined mithril armour, although not comparable to magic artefacts.

“You're already level 5? How did you advance so quickly?”

Book 2, Chapter 188

Secret(2)

Phaser went silent for a moment, endless light flashing through her eyes before she spoke, “It was because of the fighting.”

She spoke in a complicated divine language that came from the same family as the broodmother’s, different from all known divine language systems in Norland. Only because of the broodmother could Richard understand her words instead of relying solely on telepathic communication.

This was another small detail that he found strange. Humanoid as she was, a drone was supposed to be a drone. Spoken language was supposed to be unnecessary, especially when it was just the two of them where telepathy would be faster. However, Phaser acted like any other human. Regardless of whether he spoke to her physically or through telepathy, she normally replied with her actual voice.

However, her answer this time clearly couldn’t satisfy him.

“Be a little more specific.”

“... The souls of those I kill in battle are extracted, transformed into power to use. This allows me to grow quickly,” she finally said clearly.

“Where did this ability come from?”

“I had it since I was created; it should be an ability extracted from the original template.”

Richard nodded in understanding. It seemed like Phaser had inherited a number of Sinclair’s abilities, even enhancing some aspects. After all, she was a special unit created with three units of divinity. He still didn’t have a concrete idea of how much that was, but it was definitely no weaker than the ancestral soul of a large orc tribe.

Looking at her growth, Phaser seemed to be giving up on her enhanced defence to focus on increased speed and damage. Richard thought over it for a while, deciding not to interfere with her natural evolution and just have a set of light armour custom-crafted for her instead. Defence was just as important as offence on the battlefield; focusing on the latter exclusively only worked in small-scale battles. Even basic defences could oftentimes save one's fate, Sinclair being a prime example.

Once Phaser left, Richard's thoughts drifted back to Waterflower. That wild yet icy young lady was the same, overlooking all defence and refusing even leather armour. She relied solely on the power of her runes, but that would not protect her in the least from the attacks of a true powerhouse. He decided to get her a set as well, unwilling to let her fight as she wished anymore.

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With the over two hundred stakes erected and the 'bandit' bodies put on display, the fight quickly became a hot topic in Baron Fontaine's lands. In a short few days the news seemed to have grown a pair of wings, spreading throughout the Sequoia Kingdom. Richard and his essentially barren territory drew the attention of the powerhouses of the kingdom once more.

He became the centre of discussion at countless afternoon tea parties, evening feasts, and game tables. Because the Archeron name had never been heard by the people, and his official lineage was said to be broken for four generations, he was classified as one of the nouveau riche who was 'cool'.

However, these nobles did not think that Richard was cruel; he had just used methods common to all aristocrats to deal with the bandits. There had been instances where a lord had chopped up any bandits, cooked them, and fed them to his dogs. Richard's actions weren't very alarming.

Richard's identity as a great mage was another curiosity. Such a

young great mage was uncommon throughout Faelor's history, so many were inclined to believe that a grand mage stood behind him, one close to the legendary realm at that. This unknown grand mage was likely hidden away in the dark world.

The 'dark world' referenced here was basically any place humans rarely or never visited. This included the ancestral plains of the barbarians to the southwest of the Bloodstained Lands, or the Ashen Plateau to the northwest where the orcs, dwarves, and mountain people had their own kingdoms.

This incident barely had any impact on Richard's territory; it was originally a desolate stretch of land without many villages. However, it was definitely a big deal in the eyes of the ambitious nobles of the Sequoia Kingdom.

Within a secret room in Twilight Castle, a middle-aged noble with an imposing aura smashed the valuable porcelain cup in his hands, bellowing at Baron Fontaine's uncle who was before him, "THIS WAS YOUR GREAT IDEA! Didn't you say Richard wouldn't dare raise a hand even if he knew we did it? What about now? Two squadrons of the Golden Eagles completely killed off, stripped of their armour and clothing, hanging in the wilderness for everyone to see! Tell me, how will you clean this up?!"

"My Lord, Richard dared to kill the Golden Eagles and even hang their corpses on stakes, this is definitely an insult! You should mobilise a large army, directly eradicating this small—"

A sharp smack sounded out, the loud slap to the face sending the fellow flying mid-sentence. It was so powerful he fell onto the cart of tea sets behind him.

This middle-aged aristocrat was only level 8, but that single slap had sent the level 11 man flying. Fontaine's uncle was only a titled knight, so facing this earl with royal blood in front of him he did not dare to retaliate at all. He didn't even have the guts to evade, only able to endure the slap.

This man was Earl Layton, the nephew of the king. His lands were rich in exclusive products, giving him a powerful army. Even without his royal blood, he would be someone hard to offend. Of course, he wasn't here just for the benefit of the Fontaines or for Viscount Zim's reputation. However, the Baron's family was so incompetent that even despite his low expectations the Earl was fuming.

"He made them out to be bandits, you idiot! He even destroyed their faces, and ripped off the secret marks on the inside of their linen! It's completely impossible to confirm their identities. He already complained to the Baron that his caravans had been robbed a few times, didn't you announce there was a bandit group in your territory at that time? Now he's suppressed those bandits! What can we say about that?!"

"Y-yes, my Lord, I didn't think it through," Fontaine's uncles said in a low voice as he scrambled up, not daring to even clean off the blood at the corner of his mouth.

Earl Layton huffed loudly, giving the man a contemptuous look as he spoke coldly, "Do you think it's so easy to solve this issue? An apology? 200 Golden Eagles! How should I explain this to their families? There aren't even any remains to speak of, and then there's the pension! If it wasn't for your idiocy, how would they have been annihilated?!"

'Weren't you strongly in support of this plan at the start?' Of course, the young Baron's uncle did not dare put this thought to word, only able to wail in the depths of his heart.

When Zim was defeated, they had planned to obstruct the goods en route to Richard's lands, angering the knight and forcing a counterattack.

Book 2, Chapter 189

Frontier Knight

Richard counterattacking was the most important aspect of their plan. They had hidden five hundred knights all around the territory to defend from his attack, planning to use it as an excuse to attack him in the future. After all, they were not the Highland Unicorn. Publicly invading another noble's land would cause great troubles at court. It would be even worse if Richard did not use the law to sue them; that would give him the right to legally attack their territories.

The caravan that set off from Richard's territory only had fifty guards. Although desert warriors were brave and powerful, they were nothing much in front of the Golden Eagles who were the elites of the Sequoia Kingdom. The desert people were mere slaves, and when it came to battle might the level 5 warriors could not match up to the level 7-8 members of the cavalry. Their equipment was inferior to the knights, and on top of all that the desert people were a scattered group of tribes with no organisation nor military discipline. A team of elite knights could take on three times their number if such warriors were their enemy, driving them away with their tails between their legs.

Right before the Golden Eagles had engaged, everyone with real power gathered at Fontaine's lands. Earl Layton was at the lead, with Sir Booker who was the leader of the Golden Eagles, great mage Senth, a level 10 cleric of Cerces, as well as Fontaine's uncle alongside him. They felt that it was a given that the 200 Golden Eagles would win over the desert warriors. It would be considered a minor accomplishment if not one was allowed to escape.

This was why the sight of all the knights hanging on wooden stakes left everyone completely shocked. However, Richard had not let any of the knights escape; none of these bigshots had any idea of what had happened in the battle.

They found the battlefield, but all of it had intentionally been destroyed. This terrifying aftermath could not come from what they knew of Richard's power. Outside of shock, the only thing they felt was doubt.

Once he was done venting, Earl Layton turned extremely grim. He had originally expected Richard to fight back, yes, but he had never expected it to hurt so much.

Zim's defeat and this ferocious reply spoke volumes of Richard's abilities. The mage definitely could not be treated like a mere titled knight.

Frontier knight... Layton pondered over this term that had nearly lost all of its original meaning.

Richard was also a frontier knight. He had no illustrated title, no base, no supplies, or even a huge, shocking army. However, this frontier knight had completely annihilated Viscount Zim's army. And somehow, two entire squadrons of Golden Eagles had fallen at his hand.

This heavy news caused Layton to think back to history, a few thousand years ago when humans were starting to expand. The human kingdoms at that time had less than a fifth of the land they did today. They conferred titles on a large number of frontier knights, and every one held their battle flags high as they sent their mediocre armies into the vast, boundless dark world.

That was a generation where heroes came in droves. The frontier knights defeated strong enemies from time to time, seizing fertile land from the other races. Their achievements were unthinkable, beyond common sense. The lands and heads of their enemies were the greatest show of strength; countless unknown frontier knights distinguished themselves in battle one after the other. Not all of them became generational commanders, but many shot out like comets that could intimidate any enemy.

Stories of men advancing to the legendary realm were not

uncommon during those years, and so many saints were popping up that not everyone even qualified to leave their names in the history books.

Some legendary humans fell in tough battles, but even more rose to take their place. Some established the foundations of various kingdoms, while others went all out to become demigods. Some even ignited their godfires, flying into the deep blue skies to join the pantheon of the gods. The Goddess of Fire, Selia, was one of the most resplendent names of that era.

And now, thousands of years later, humans were the leaders of the plane. The dark world occupied less than a fifth of the continent. When later generations thought back to the time of expansion, they began to refer to those centuries as the Era of Glory.

In the Era of Glory, frontier knights were the most famous of nobles. When one led dozens of warriors in wretched equipment on their first steps into the war, it could have been the first step in the appearance of a legendary being in a few decades.

Layton saw a shadow of such glory in Richard. The title of frontier knight had long been worn down by the ebb and flow of time, to the point that most had forgotten its former glory and brilliance. The ghosts of the past seemed to be shining through this young great mage.

However, the Earl was well-versed in history and politics. This light would need a great deal of blood and destruction to fuel its glow.

‘We need to put our full power into dealing with him!’ Layton came to a conclusion even he himself was unwilling to believe. However, far too many miracles had come from Richard’s hands. Looking at it on paper, Zim’s army could wipe Richard out several times over and still not be destroyed.

It was now obvious that a few groups of elite knights or

swordsmen would not be enough to get rid of him. A proper army had to be built up, with an experienced commander at the lead. It needed a decent mix of types, and powerful warriors, mages, and clerics. Perhaps a saint? Layton's mind whirled as he began to think up a plan.

Although the appearance of a saint meant things couldn't be kept under wraps anymore, he felt a strong sense of danger. This was the scent of an enemy whose terror he did not want to admit; one that he wanted to crush before it grew to surpass him.

Indeed, enemy. Richard's importance had grown in the Earl's mind, turning from cannon fodder that was just a distraction to someone on his official list of enemies to destroy.

Richard had no idea of Layton's thoughts. Although the clash with the Viscount had been a part of his plans, the appearance of the Golden Eagles was far too quick and powerful a reaction for his liking. However, this would not affect his strategy. He did not care for the complications in the kingdom; in the near future, his status as a noble would be cemented. His eyes were on the masterless, vast Bloodstained Lands, a chaotic place with ample resources.

He knew any reaction to the 200 knights on stakes would be a large army that would be challenging to handle. The army would have a considerable number of mages and clerics, and could even have saints.

However, this was his goal. An Earl would have to do everything in his power to gather such an army. It was obvious that this was no simple matter, and needed prudent consideration.

Book 2, Chapter 190

Dilemma

Earls were amongst the highest nobles in the Sequoia Kingdom. If Layton were to enter full-fledged war with Richard, he would definitely attract the attention of the nobles of the kingdom. Most importantly, there seemed to be no reason for this war. Richard was a destitute noble with no wealth, his territory void of people. And one had to get past the Direwolf Duke to actually take over his lands

Internal friction was unavoidable in any country; to a certain extent, it was a process of self-adjustment that followed the law of the jungle. However, civil war for no reason was something no leader with a clear mind would allow.

Besides, Richard was the vassal of a powerful law. Layton would still have to consider the Direwolf Duke's reactions to all this and would have to make some deals in the shadows. That was all a part of politics.

However, Bevry was currently at war with the Whiterock Dukedom, and this war would take a few months at minimum. Since he could not return to his lands at this time, it would be difficult for Duke Grasberg and the rest to discuss Richard with him. Now was their only chance.

Placating the Direwolf Duke, gathering an army, mapping a route, ensuring the troops were rested, even borrowing clerics from a church... These were all troublesome tasks, but necessary to finish. And with their constraints, they had to be done quickly.

Time was the one thing Richard lacked the most. As long as he had time, his power would only grow. The broodmother would continue to create battle drones, and the level 4 throwers were already comparable to elite knights. Richard himself would continue to turn materials into runes, a part of which would

strengthen himself and his army. The rest would turn into ten times the gold as the material costs. The gold would then buy more magic materials, and the cycle would continue.

Less than half a month had passed, and only a few thousand gold coins remained from Zim's ransom. Richards new troops had completed elementary training, only needing to experience actual battlefields. That day, when another elite thrower brought a dozen or so of its brethren to his camp, Richard felt the time was right.

When night fell, he gathered all his core followers and had them make preparations to depart for the Bloodstained Lands two days later.

"Boss, how many people are you bringing? Who's going to watch over the territory?" Gangdor asked. Ever since Richard had left the training of the troops to him, this big lug had diligently started learning about war. Of course, he didn't have a great foundation. Outside of getting two novice knights to cram all the knowledge they could into his brain, he still had to learn to read. Elementary language spells could only give one the ability to understand and speak a language, not to read or write.

"Everyone. There won't be a single soldier left behind."

Richard's decision left everyone shocked. The castle was still being constructed, the roads still being levelled, and residents were being recruited to clear the barren lands of the territory. Everything had only just begun, and the young Baron Fontaine was still eyeing these lands covetously. If nobody was left behind to guard it, then wouldn't others be able to take over their nest?

Seeing everyone's expressions, Richard knew what they were worried about. He smiled and nodded at the map, looking over them as he asked, "Tell me, is there anything worth guarding on this land?"

"The castle's foundations have been completed, and then there's the roads and lumber..." Gangdor's eyes rose at that point in his

speech; he finally understood.

“Yes, that’s it,” Richard said with a smile, “That’s all they’ll see when they come. These things are not valuable, or cannot be moved away. More importantly, this is still my rightful territory. Even if they march in with an army, they have to return it to me later. Unless I die, this place has no use to them whatsoever. That is a fundamental order of nobility, and cannot easily be flouted. So my most precious wealth on this land is my army, you! As long as I take all my men out, Zim, his father, his uncle... everyone will be left at a loss. Would they occupy my land? If they leave once they find nothing, that’s fine. If they don’t, the more troops I leave behind the worse it will be. If I don’t leave anyone behind, we can come back at any time and destroy them!

“That’s why,” Richard emphasised with a knock on the map, “We’ll be going out at full strength!”

Early in the morning two days later, Richard took his army and set off from his territory, disappearing into the red world of the Bloodstained Lands.

Days later, an army of about a thousand people entered Baron Fontaine’s lands. This army had a mix of heavy infantry, longbowmen, and even arbalests who were there specifically to deal with cavalry. The army was full of elite veterans, the forces coming directly from earl Yatu.

At the army’s head was Sir Hogan, commonly called Old Hogan. The titled knight was already fifty years old, with an illustrious military career spanning more than three decades. He was cautious and reliable when leading troops, and had suffered few losses in his life. Old Hogan had been born a commoner, starting as a common footsoldier and slowly accumulating a reputation until he gained his title. Although this ageing knight did not qualify to join the ranks of the high nobles, Earl Yatu still thought of him at crucial times.

Richard was a tough enemy to deal with. No truly intelligent noble would target him if all they wanted was glory. Only extreme egotists or masochists would fight him instead of a group of brigands or bandits.

Amongst the army that had just arrived in Baron Fontaine's lands were two great mages and two level 10 clerics, as well as six weaker ones. The reinforcements were still gathering. This follow-up army had 200 elite heavy infantry, 600 light infantry, and 200 paladins from Cerces. The Highland Wargod's church had also dispatched its own legion, led by a level 12 cleric. There were great mages amongst that army as well.

The one commanding the reinforcements was Sir Odom, a saint warrior who was Earl Yatu's younger brother. Odom was violent and merciless, not knowing when to give up. Some years ago, he had raped a noble lady from the royal bloodline and was demoted from being a baron to a mere titled knight. However, his power as a saint left the punishment minor. As for the noble lady, her family considered her a disgrace and sent her off to the countryside to be the wife of a remote knight. Odom chased her all the way there, and that titled knight soon met an 'accident' that left her to become Odom's mistress.

Ignoring those 'tiny' imperfections, Odom possessed great individual strength and was a talented commander. The powerful nobles still had a use for him.

Once these reinforcements arrived, Baron Fontaine would have a balanced army of over 3000 soldiers, all with high-quality equipment. There would be four great mages, a legion from the Highland Wargod, and a saint amongst their ranks, as well as the reliable Old Hogan in command. Even if they attacked frontally, they would be able to crush Richard's army. Even the Direwolf Duke couldn't wipe them out without effort.

Book 2, Chapter 191

Dilemma(2)

The upper class of the Sequoia Kingdom fell into idle chatter once more. Of course, they had been taught a lesson to not directly ridicule the Highland Unicorn making a mountain out of a molehill, but the countless innuendos and gazes were obvious. Everyone eagerly awaited the result of this fight between elephant and ant, as if they were watching a new drama. They didn't care about victory or loss; no, that was obvious. They were waiting to see how long the grand mage behind Richard would take to show himself.

However, there were also people calmly watching this farce. Although the Direwolf Duke was not at Deepcliff City, the more powerful of his vassals were visiting the city more and more. Bordering Richard's lands were a marquess and some viscounts and barons. Many amongst them were silently increasing their defences.

There was a joyous atmosphere in Twilight Castle. Once Old Hogan's army had reached them, the former gloom had been swept away.

Within the most luxurious conference room in the castle, Hogan, Layton, Booker, Senth, the cleric Bayenne, and others with power were sat discussing their next move at a round table. The young Baron's uncle had no right to enter the conference room, treated more like an errand boy. As for Fontaine and his mother, they had been chased out of the castle. On the surface, they were on a vacation in the country, hoping for the fresh air to help the young Baron grow strong and calm his mother's grief.

Earl Layton had already finished a brief on Richard's territory, terrain, and troops. He also listed any important forces that belonged to Richard. He didn't want to keep the introduction

simple, but there was pitifully little information on Richard's core party. Most had been taken from the surviving warriors from the battle with Sinclair.

They also had information from Deepcliff City, but by the looks of it it was not as reliable as that from Viscount Zim and the released prisoners of war.

Sir Hogan, whose hair was already half-grey, was stood in front of the map with a magic pen in hand, marking out a few important choke points as he chose their path of advance. The plan was already prepared, and they were in the midst of carrying out. Hogan was only repeating himself for the sake of the mage and the cleric.

These magic classes were very troublesome. They did not understand anything about warfare, but if they didn't know the battle plan they would grow cross. Mages could normally choose their position on the battlefield; outside of cooperating with the main forces to launch bombardments, duels with the opponent's mages were something they decided on their own.

Sir Hogan drew a wiggly line from Earl Yatu's territory to that of Baron Fontaine, "Gentlemen, Sir Odom's army has already gathered. We are awaiting the arrival of the Highland Wargod's clerics and another great mage. They are estimated to be here in ten days."

"Ha! Once Odom's army gets here, we'll be able to teach that Richard an unforgettable lesson!" Sir Booker said with a chuckle, spreading his arms, "Let's hope Richard can build his magnificent castle in ten days!"

Loud laughter rang out within the conference room. Although they had been gathered into such a massive army, everyone who had come late was confused by Layton making such a huge fuss about this. The death of the Golden Eagles had already become a taboo topic that nobody was told about. Outside of the core

members, most of the people here only knew that Richard had annihilated Viscount Zim's army.

"Should we give Richard a little lesson first? That'll exert some pressure," a great mage suggested. This 40-year-old man had complicated resentment towards Richard.

"No! Our first order of business is to strengthen our defences. Firstly, we have to station more troops at Twilight Castle. Secondly, we have to protect the path from here to the Earl's territory."

"Would Richard actually dare attack Sir Odom's army?" another great mage said with a laugh. He felt like he was making a joke, but Layton and Hogan did not laugh. The latter had been informed about everything upon arrival, and did not believe it was impossible for Richard to do something in that vein.

Sir Hogan cleared his throat, not addressing the attempt at humour, "I believe we should station 400 guards around Twilight Castle, I will decide the constitution. I hope the great mages and clerics can stay in the city for a while; I wish Richard would attack the castle over Sir Odom's army."

Everyone in the conference room nodded in agreement. While 400 wasn't a large number of defenders, there would be enough mages and clerics to cause serious damage to Richard if he came knocking. Although nobody thought Odom would fail, it was still best to avoid being attacked on unfamiliar terrain.

A light knock suddenly rang through the conference room. A handsome young noble, an officer of the army, entered and saluted to Sir Hogan, "My Lord, our scouts have just sent new information. A few days ago, Richard took all his troops and left for the Bloodstained Lands. His exact destination is unknown."

"What? All of his troops?" both Hogan and Layton questioned, their faces warping.

The young officer looked nervous but continued, “Yes. The scout took the risk to enter deep into his territory and even saw the castle’s construction site. Not a single soldier is in his lands.”

Layton slowly fell back into his chair, looking serious, “He actually took all his men away. Isn’t he afraid...” Halfway through his sentence, he did not say any more.

What did Richard’s land have except stone, food, and the foundations of a castle? Could they move a large pit? Commoners and masons were valuable assets, but how many could there even be in his lands? Even if all of them were caught and brought back, they would not make up for the expenses of this army.

On top of that, such an act would be in direct defiance of the Sequoia Kingdom’s laws. The people were the personal property of the ruling lord, nobody could take them away. Any noble, especially one with power, would do all they could to protect the laws of the kingdom regarding land and subjects. These commoners were the cornerstone of society, the base upon which all nobles stood.

“What should we do now?” Layton asked Hogan.

“I don’t know either,” Old Hogan laughed wryly.

“When Sir Odom’s army arrives, we will have 3500 people here. Fontaine’s lands don’t produce enough to support the expenses of such a large army,” Layton said with a frown.

“We can get that kid Fontaine to give up his family’s savings,” Bayenne interrupted coldly, “after all, we’re stationed here to protect them.”

Many in the conference room were nodding. Layton and Hogan exchanged a glance, but did not say much. Little Fontaine was just a child, and his uncle’s level 11 strength was nothing. This young Baron who had recently sided with them was just a pawn in Duke Grasberg’s eyes.

It took a lot of gold to keep up this army, something even Earl Yatu and Viscount Zim could not handle. The cost of the normal soldiers itself was a part of that, but most of the money was spent on the great mages and clerics from the Highland Wargod. The greed of these magic classes far exceeded the power of their spells.

Book 2, Chapter 192

Level Up

Richard had walked away just like that, but this left Layton and Hogan in a dilemma. If they did not pursue and attack, they would have nothing to do. But if they did, Richard's army was as mobile as a group of horse bandits. The Bloodstained Lands were so vast, how could they ever catch up?

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As he walked on the red earth of the Bloodstained Lands, breathing that familiar, acrid air, Richard felt like he had returned to the time when he was being chased by Red Cossack all over the place.

Even now he did not know who that enemy was. He only knew it was the one person outside of Sinclair who left him that suffocated. They had backed him into a corner with a group of unorganised horse bandits, unlike Sinclair who relied on sheer power to crush her enemies. It was thanks to that pack of wolves that his ability to direct and control the battlefield had grown rapidly.

As he stepped onto this red land, Richard felt the Archeron bloodline deep within him stirring in anticipation. It was calling out to him ferociously, thirsty for blood and destruction, bewitching him to destroy all the enemies in his path as he moved forward.

The army advanced in silence. Behind approximately 400 desert warriors and a hundred barbarians was a square formation of 120 throwers led by four elites. Within was a supply caravan of ten light carriages fully loaded with food and water.

The troops were moving at a normal soldier's jog. This was considered fast for a normal army, but it was only average for

Richard's soldiers. This little disparity grew particularly obvious the longer a war stretched on.

As they all marched on, Richard was sat upright on his warhorse and moving in tandem with his troops. His horsemanship had grown to great heights by now, to the point that he was a rare presence among mages.

However, Norland's grand mages usually had their own unique mounts. And even without one, a pacifying spell could tame the most aggressive of horses. Faelor's mages were quite inferior in that regard. Magic was still grand and extravagant, and it seemed unthinkable to use it for convenience. Personal enjoyment came about through ordinary methods.

Faelor's great mages used carriages when in an army, having high demands for their comfort during the march. They could not match up to Richard's mobility at all.

Richard was connected to the broodmother's mind as they advanced. She had been in deep slumber all this while, in the midst of advancing to level 5.

"Master, I finished digesting all the magic crystals you sent. I finished levelling up, you can choose what aspects you want me to adjust." She sent a large amount of information through their link. Having advanced to level 5, the broodmother's mind had grown more powerful and she could communicate far more clearly with him. The range of their communication had increased from 200 kilometres to 300 kilometres.

Richard's spirits were lifted greatly by the news, and he went through the information he received.

It seemed like level 5 was a watershed. The broodmother had acquired many special abilities, one of which was to analyse her advancement. The creation of Phaser had played a crucial role in this evolution, contributing almost two-thirds of the key constituents she needed to advance on her own.

She also listed a few essential factors that would contribute to her advancements. Divinity from a god, divinity from an ancestral soul, the power of a divine soul, powerful creatures, elemental items, magic crystals, so on and so forth. The regular food she ate contributed almost nothing to what she needed. The list showed that the growth from just creating combat drones had decreased substantially as well. Given current circumstances, she would need five or six years to advance if she created combat units continuously day and night.

The new level also came with great personal growth for the broodmother. Her acid spray could now travel upto twenty metres, harming even the most poisonous of lizards. The venom she produced from her own body now was only slightly inferior to Sinclair's manticore at full strength, and her mind flay had been strengthened significantly.

She could defeat most people at level 14 one-on-one. Nobody under the saint level could do anything to her, and even if they could she never battled alone.

The only disadvantage was that her mobility dropped again, back to ten kilometres an hour. This was because she grew in size once more. The broodmother was currently ten metres tall, and a whopping sixty metres long. This was a huge monster, larger even than some giant dragons.

The broodmother also added several new species of combat units. Richard felt like a particular species of poisonous bat was something he urgently needed. It was an aerial combat drone that had great speed, powerful venom, and could be manufactured in great numbers. She could create as many as thirty every day, albeit only two if they were elites. Richard's eyes were set on these elite bats.

The elite bats were about level 8 in power; common beasts could not match up to them in the least. Moreover, their vision was particularly more acute than the ordinary bats. These elites could

also be given an additional boost, giving them night vision, but then only one could be spawned per day.

However, even a single one would make for an irreplaceable spy. This was because elite drones could sustain a mental connection with him, transmitting anything they saw or heard. These elite bats weren't strong of mind, only able to communicate over 30 kilometres, but a permanent scouting range of thirty kilometres was extremely formidable.

Richard thus had the broodmother create four elite bats, before creating two more with night vision. He then continued browsing through the information.

After advancing to level 5, the broodmother could upgrade herself once more. This included additional defence, magical protection, magic resistance, increased speed, and enhanced range and damage from the acid spray. She could even develop flying spikes that could be shot hundreds of metres away. This way, her personal combat power would be strengthened to its maximum. However, if there was a choice Richard would prioritize additional capabilities in drone creation.

Just as he was pondering over this, the broodmother spoke up in his mind, "Master, you might want to consider upgrading the worker drones or creating a combat drone of your own."

Richard grew intrigued, looking through the two sections of information that she had mentioned once more.

Book 2, Chapter 193

Level Up(2)

The worker drones had been around since the broodmother's birth, but because she was always spawning battle drones more hadn't been created after they dried out. An upgrade would increase their size and speed, also giving them a storage capability similar to that of a worker bee. They would be able to break down the food they ate into nutrition in their bodies, feeding the broodmother when they returned to her. That way, the problem of her food would largely be resolved.

As for designing his own combat drones, the broodmother had blueprints for several fundamental elements that he could combine as he liked. One special ability could allow him to create new drones based on his own current measurements. However, every custom drone cost more to unlock than the broodmother's imprinted soldiers, needing seventy magic crystals compared to fifty.

Richard grew hesitant for a moment, but decided to try making a new drone anyway. The broodmother still had about ninety crystals' worth of energy left in her body, which would be enough.

The first choice was the form, for which there were dozens of options. Outside of some strange insect-like forms, the rest seemed to be the physiques of beings she had eaten. This included troggs, goblins, lizards, and so on and so forth. For this, Richard did not hesitate to choose a humanoid form. That way he wouldn't have to explain where his soldiers were coming from.

He also chose hands instead of claw-like weapons. An enhanced keratin layer under the skin gave them a natural layer of leather armour. Their speed and strength were increased as well, making them the equivalent of a barbarian.

Lastly, he decided to strengthen their intelligence and energy

storage. They could thus act like the throwers, able to last weeks on a single big meal, greatly boosting the flexibility of the army. The increased intelligence would allow them to learn to use complicated weapons, and also allow them to accumulate fighting experience. Although the broodmother's normal drones could not grow in level, there was a vast difference between a veteran and a rookie. This was especially true in the tactical department, where one could be severely outsmarted.

The broodmother's name for this new type of soldier was not exactly creative: strengthened humanoid warrior. They were about level 8 upon creation, level 9 if equipped with weapons and armour like Richard envisioned. After some time training and fighting, they would approach a knight's power. It was just that they could not lead armies.

Given the power of these new soldiers, the level 5 broodmother could only spawn three humanoids a day. They were slightly weaker than adult barbarians, but Richard was quite satisfied with them. The broodmother's troops would grow in number until they held an absolute advantage.

Instructing the broodmother to create a week's worth of workers and then put all its effort into these strengthened warriors, Richard led his army into the depths of the Bloodstained Lands. The crimson world seemed much more pleasing to the eye this time around.

Noon the next day, two giant bats the size of a horse's head flew straight towards Richard, circling him a few times before landing and hanging from each side of his warhorse. The mount was immediately alarmed, but Richard cast a pacifying spell to calm it down.

He looked over one of these bats carefully. The creature was many times larger than the normal bat, with two long fangs on the sides of its mouth. Normal vampiric bats were grey, but this one was deep black with a few streaks of scarlet running from its head

to the rear of its claws. This made it seem particularly ferocious.

These elite bats had much higher intelligence than normal ones. They could be considered intelligent life with a bat's appearance, so when Richard held it up to study it curled its two rear claws and retracted its poisonous fangs. These claws and teeth were its most formidable weapons.

Richard was very satisfied with the creature. He threw it into the air, and it flew out to orbit the troops in a thirty kilometre range. It would come back to rest after a while, and the other would fly out.

The same time the next day, two more elites turned up. Richard's surveillance of the surroundings grew much tighter, and with a supplement of over ten wandering wind wolves there was almost no chance of him being ambushed.

The day after, a bat even larger than the elites caught up to his team. It had an additional pair of tiny blood red eyes on its head, the source of its night vision.

By now, Richard was extremely confident about his trip to the Bloodstained Lands. He was in no hurry to reach Bluewater, instead wandering aimlessly through the area nearby.

In order to meet his goals, he needed to train and warm up his army before the war. It didn't necessarily have to be Michla's forces as designated by Amon, other horse bandits were fine as well. He wouldn't mind attacking a caravan under Red Cossack either.

The Bloodstained Lands was originally a world of chaos and bloodthirst. Once Sinclair destroyed its delicate balance, it had turned into a completely lawless world. Only after a new balance of power was established atop a pool of blood would order be restored again.

A caravan would also provide intelligence. Zim definitely wouldn't let matters rest here. The large army could not possibly

wait until Richard returned, nor could it dissolve without doing anything. If that was the case, even his father Earl Yatu would lose all face. Thus, this large army would eventually chase him into the Bloodstained Lands.

And if they did, Richard had no plans of letting them return.

War was a good source of wealth. The new humanoids were certainly strong, about as powerful as elite knights, but the problem was that too few of them were created in a day. The broodmother needed 50 more crystals to increase her output, and thankfully magic crystals were a mass-produced product on Faelor. In other words, one could purchase them with gold.

The army advanced through the Bloodstained Lands for a few days at leisure. Richard's connection with the broodmother started to break, indicating that they were almost 300 kilometres from the Land of Turmoil.

Just as everyone was falling under the illusion that the Bloodstained Lands was a beautiful, peaceful place, the elite bats suddenly brought a message to them. A large, armed caravan was on their right, and through the bat's eyes Richard could see a blood-red flag flying atop the caravan. It was Red Cossack, and judging from their direction and constitution they were cutting through the Bloodstained Lands to return to a human kingdom.

Any caravan that could avoid the normal roads to cut across the Bloodstained Lands was extremely fat, very difficult to chew.

Book 2, Chapter 194

Toll

The elite bat hovered around the target, watching their every move. This was a large caravan of more than fifty supply carriages and twenty just for troops. The guard was comprised of nearly 400 cavalymen, and atop the carriages themselves were arbalests.

Perhaps it was because they were nearing the human kingdoms, but the guards of the caravan seemed relaxed as they chatted and joked with one another. Richard could vaguely make out through the bat's sharp ears that they were discussing the bonus after the mission was accomplished. These conversations told him that the bounty was valuable.

Richard reined his horse in, "Gangdor, stop the troops. We have something to do."

"HALT!" Gangdor roared before taking his battleaxe off his back, "Who are we attacking this time, boss?"

"An old friend. Red Cossack!"

Gangdor, Waterflower, the trolls, and even all the warriors who had fought in the bitter war at the Bloodstained Lands had their eyes light up. They had killed many Red Cossack men, but had lost a lot of comrades as well. Richard's army was now more powerful than ever, and the same went for his party. They would naturally be a menace to Red Cossack.

"Don't get too excited, they're still thirty kilometres away!" Richard couldn't help but shake his head at the murderous aura of his subordinates. He took out his map and looked through it, deciding on a route.

The troops then took off, arriving at the designated location before getting an hour of rest. When the Red Cossack stopped three kilometres away for lunch, they had already travelled an

hour longer than Richard's army without rest nor food. When time came for battle, their soldiers would use up their energy more quickly. This was a very small detail in a quick skirmish, but if the battle dragged on it would grow to have a heavy impact.

The enemy scouts discovered them when they were two kilometres from the temporary camp. The caravan was stirred up momentarily, but it quickly died down as everyone grew unsure of what to do. Only the guards mounted their horses one by one, tightly gripping their weapons.

"Looks like they're full of confidence," Richard said drily from afar.

"Can we win?" Flowsand asked. This caravan was enormous to her; it would not be easy to defeat them in one fell swoop.

Richard had already estimated the difference in strength between them, "You'll have a lot of work after the battle."

"I have three others under me now, don't you mean all of us have to work hard?"

"Even combined, all of them aren't worth half of you."

A group of cavalymen rushed out from the camp, reining in their horses when they were ten metres from Richard. Their leader, a burly fellow, roared out, "Who the hell are you people? This is a caravan of Red Cossack! You cannot come any nearer. Tell me your identities, now! Or get ready to face the consequences!"

This was a real threat. Caravans and bandits were often interchangeable in the Bloodstained Lands, especially with the cruel Red Cossack. They often turned into brigands if they met caravans with profits to be made.

"My name is Richard Archeron. I'm a frontier knight from the Sequoia Kingdom," Richard said peacefully.

"A frontier knight!" the rider laughed heartily, "Red Cossack doesn't have much to do with the Sequoia Kingdom, so don't try to

threaten us with any fancy titles! We've been in a good mood for the past few days... Let me give you a word of advice: leave. Now!"

"What a coincidence. I'm in a good mood as well. Right now, I'm using my title as frontier knight to demand a toll."

"What toll?" the leader roared in disbelief, "This is the Bloodstained Lands! We have to pay to pass through here? Where's your checkpoint?"

"Checkpoint? Gangdor, go plant my flag." Richard then pointed at the new flag on the red soil, "Here it is."

The captain grew so angry he laughed uneasily, "Who are you to collect a toll?"

The caravan had a bountiful harvest this time, and with their goal not far away they weren't interested in a fresh battle. If not for that, he would have had his men charge forth the moment a toll was mentioned.

"The Bloodstained Lands is the territory I marked out," Richard explained seriously, "I can charge any amount of toll to whomever I want in my territory. For now, I'm setting it to be a hundred gold coins per goods carriage. Go back and get the money ready."

"Also, let me inspect the goods in your carriages. If there's anything valuable, there will be additional taxes."

Richard's serious attitude and speech were completely absurd. The Red Cossack leader turned red all over, his mind blanking for a moment without a way to react. He huffed a few times, saying fiercely, "You want a toll? I have no gold, you can take my life. If you want to, bring it on!"

"Good!" Richard unexpectedly said with a nod.

Without any need for a command, sixty throwers suddenly tossed their axes out. With a mere ten metres of distance to cross, the flying hatchets held unbelievable might. These axes were not thrown without aim; with four each targeting every cavalryman,

there was little chance the attacks would miss.

Seeing the sky of flying axes, the Red Cossack riders felt a large shadow looming over their heads. The fear of death paralysed them, stopping even their breaths! Four of the axes produced the sharpest whistles of the lot. These came from the four elites, all aimed at the knight who had spoken to Richard.

Once the wave of flying axes passed, there was nothing blocking Richard's sight anymore.

“What happened?!”

“He killed captain Johnny!”

“Get ready for war!”

The roars grew louder and louder. The guards already on their horses rushed forward, creating a barrier in front of the supply vehicles. The labourers and carriage drivers readied their shields and machetes. Some of them even climbed atop the vehicles, crossbows in hand. Even the carriage drivers of caravans who dared to cut through the Bloodstained Lands could become bandits at any time. And Red Cossack was known for their violence and strength.

Richard did not rush into the battle, waving for two groups of desert warriors to flank the left and right so they could block off all escape. The barbarians lifted huge shields in a neat formation, pressing forwards with no hurry. The soldiers of the caravan were not fully dressed in armour, so the barbarians could fight them based on physique alone. And there were two waves of throwers to get through before that was even a possibility.

Powerhouses like Gangdor and the trolls were placed between the ordinary soldiers or behind the troops, awaiting their chance to deliver a fatal blow to the enemy.

Book 2, Chapter 195

Toll(2)

Richard got off his own horse, escorted by a few barbarians as he drew closer to the caravan. It wasn't easy to cast spells off the bumpy back of a horse. It was at that moment that one of the Red Cossack cavalrymen roared out, following which an entire squadron started charging towards him.

The commander was prepared to cut through the line of barbarians, wanting to kill the young noble in mage robes in one go. With their master lost, these slaves would turn into scattered sand. He had plentiful experience with capturing barbarians, so he was very confident in the might of his troops. Red Cossack caught more than 10,000 barbarians every year from the ancestral plains. These barbarians were sturdy and outstanding warriors, but that did not mean they could compare to trained soldiers. He wanted to show the foolish noble the might of a true army!

The sight of hundreds of cavalrymen charging at full speed was rather terrifying. The bloodlust in the air, the thunderous roar of the hooves hitting the ground... it would be enough to terrify more than half of these barbarian warriors. This heavy infantry may already be in formation, but they wouldn't be able to help but panic. On the battlefield, breaking formation was a death sentence. As his cavalry grew faster and faster, the commander's lips had already parted in a bloodthirsty laugh.

Richard had a cold smile on his face as well. His barbarians were genuine soldiers; anyone who thought they were still the same tribalistic savages would have to pay a huge price. This fellow wanted to compete with him in terms of troop quality and command?

Even as the cavalrymen reached their peak speed, the throwers had already tossed out the first wave of hatchets. The whistling

axes turned into a shower of death, taking out thirty to forty soldiers in one go. At the same time, Richard quickly took out the Book of Holding. Eighteen direbears suddenly spawned in front of the cavalry's charge, all lined up in a row. This instant judgement and control was an art unto itself!

Numerous dull thuds rang out. The cavalrymen were going too fast to dodge, crashing into the enormous direbears. While the bears were all knocked down, the knights and their horses were both sent crashing to the ground, bones shattering. The second row quickly reined in their horses, but their comrades rammed into them from behind. Another round of thuds rang out, accentuated by the breaking of bones.

The fierce assault formation of the cavalry was thrown into chaos instantly. However, before they could even recover the throwers continued with the remaining waves of hatchets. Although accuracy was compromised to an extent, that was no problem for a bombardment with no specific target.

360 hatchets flew through the sky, turning into a dark cloud. Once they landed on the incoming cavalry, only a few dazed men were left standing. All eighteen direbears had died in battle, while less than a hundred of the attackers remained.

Although this was not their first time seeing the throwers' attack together, Gangdor, Olar, the trolls, the barbarians, and even Richard himself were stunned with disbelief.

However, Richard quickly recovered from his stupor, "Barbarians! Line formation! FORWARD!"

The voices of the barbarians rang out in a united battle cry as they raised their shields, forming tight rows that took large strides towards the cavalrymen that still remained.

Only a dozen of the Red Cossack troops had the courage to maintain morale in this terrible situation, growling as they charged towards the barbarians. However, what met them was a

steel-like barrier. The front row of the barbarians raised their shields and pressed on, while their brethren just behind placed their shields to guard their backs. They were all glimmering with light, being empowered by the elven warsong.

BOOM!

The violent, forceful collision ended in the barbarians' victory. The wall of shields knocked the cavalymen backwards, and they quickly moved the shields aside to brandish their axes. The row of axes glinted as they struck in unison to draw blood.

Seeing his barbarian warriors defeating the attacking cavalry troops face-to-face in an instant, Richard was very pleased.

However, at that very moment, a powerful sense of danger surged in his mind. Before he could even detect the source of the problem, he saw a faint grey light shining on his body. The moment it touched him the chill of death pierced into his soul. He trembled, the minds connected to his vibrating as they struck back to disperse this will.

A pale gold flame immediately fell on his body, breaking up the deathly will. This was Flowsand's divine spell, Death Guard, able to resist any magic that could cause instant death. Even though it wasn't a powerful defence, it did serve its purpose. The target could only suffer grave injuries at worst.

Flowsand had been unimaginably fast in casting this spell. Her divine flames were burning on Richard practically the same instant the grey light shone on him. However, even so Richard turned pale, snorting two lines of blood from his nose.

It was not easy to counteract a grade 7 death spell. Even if the instant death was disrupted, even with the many souls linked to his resisting it, Richard was still heavily injured.

Yet another brush with death! And this time, it was his soul!

A very complicated emotion arose in Richard's heart, a mix of

fear and rage. His short hair began to float in the wind as he locked onto the great mage amongst the supply carriages, seeing the remnants of a scroll burning in the man's hands!

“Flowsand!” Richard yelled fervently.

There was no need for anything more. Flowsand immediately cast a divine spell on him to produce a magic barrier. They had grown so used to each other that they did not require words to communicate. She retreated the moment she cast the spell, putting some distance between herself and Richard. This time, she did not try to cast Outburst.

Richard's mind was completely focused on the opposing great mage, an inferno raging within his eyes like a volcano about to erupt. He gritted his teeth, squeezing out incantations at an unthinkable speed paired with hurried yet precise gestures. It took less than a second for a fireball to form in his hands!

Fireball after fireball whistled forth, forming a straight line between Richard and the opposing great mage. The opponent's magic barrier started flickering once the first few had landed, changing his expression. “How is this possible?!” the man yelled out. A mere three fireballs had left his grade 6 defensive spell on the brink of destruction! It could normally defend against six to seven fireballs in succession!

His life endangered, the great mage burst forth with everything he had. Despite the disturbance of the fire he successfully completed the chant for another magic barrier. However, the shield's lustre only stabilised for three seconds before it dissipated under incessant attacks.

The great mage was hard pressed to reply, his forehead beading with sweat. All he could see was fireball after fireball in a seemingly endless line. His mind had already been stunted by fear and shock, and he could only shout as he instantly cast a weaker barrier spell. However, even as it flickered into existence that spell

was completely shattered as well.

The magical flames licked at the great mage's skin, leaving him in immense pain. He fell into despair, going as far as to mock himself, "I've fallen under an illusion!"

He was far too busy at that point to realise that people grew happy on the verge of insanity. His other mistake was not realising that all of Richard's fireballs had been enhanced with magic penetration, naturally being more painful than those of someone else.

By the time the eleventh fireball had exploded, the supply carriage had been reduced to a pile of black ash and charcoal without any hints as to its previous form. The great mage had disappeared as well, but two more fireballs still ravaged the earth that had already been melted by the waves of fire, completely wiping out all vestiges of anything that had once existed on the ground.

Richard was not perverted enough to torture corpses, but he'd had no idea when he would be able to destroy the great mage's defences. The fireballs had been launched far too quickly, and he hadn't been able to stop himself from wasting a few more.

However, the sound of a dozen explosions focused on one point had basically covered everything else on the battlefield. Most of the soldiers on either side had stopped fighting, looking at the place where the great mage's carriage had once been with stunned faces.

In a mere eleven seconds, thirteen fireballs had turned a level 13 mage to nothingness.

Book 2, Chapter 196

Raging Flames

Richard spat out a breath of red-hot air, as if abyssal fires were burning in his lungs. He started to feel empty, waves of fatigue enveloping him. The violent surges of his bloodline had faded away, but the side-effects did not go away.

All his fury had congealed into a violent eruption. His blood had grown as hot and dense as lava, destined to destroy all obstacles in its path. Such was the fury of the Archérons.

He was panting hard, still overtaken by the desire to crush his opponent with his own hands. And indeed, that was what he had done. Not just any mage could cast a continuous stream of fireballs that could burn the opponent to ashes. Nobody had seen such a duel before, nobody had likely even imagined it.

That was how he unlocked another ability of his Archéron bloodline — Blaze. It would increase his casting speed for offensive spells, somewhat similar to Flowsand's Outburst although nowhere near as powerful. However, unlike Outburst that had a week-long cooldown Blaze could be used once a day.

His heart was still raging when the wave of heat dissipated. At its most extreme, violence was an infectious art that could shake the very soul. This thrill of destruction was something Richard had never experienced before.

His elven blood strengthened his summoning magic, giving him a calm elegance and control. On the other hand, his Archéron bloodline strengthened his offense and turned crude violence into art. These were two sides of a coin, two extremes that could never combine.

Eventually recovering from the violent phase, Richard didn't so much as change his expression as he sent the order to attack. He

then took out a mana potion, downing it in one go. Flowsand also cast a vitality spell on him, and alongside his own rune he recuperated his mana at five times the normal speed. In just a few minutes he had enough mana on hand to cast three or four more fireballs.

Many of the Red Cossack men were still in shock from the scene. Only when the desert warriors and barbarians closed in did they brandish their weapons, trying to resist the aggression despite being unsettled.

It was at that point that a thunderous boom rang through the battlefield, so much that Richard felt his ear starting to hurt. This sound was even louder than the consecutive fireballs! Green smoke rose into the sky, but any vision of its source was blocked by the carriages. It was impossible to see what was going on.

Richard felt his connection with two wind wolves disappear. The two had been leading a group of desert warriors to flank around the caravan, and after his command to attack they had just begun the attack. His heart sank as he quickly jumped back onto his warhorse. Looking into the distance, he saw the fifty desert warriors alongside them all fall off their horses, blood spurting out of their bodies.

Nearly all of them had been killed in an instant.

For a second, Richard even grew suspicious that they had been attacked by a group of throwers. How were his desert warriors demounted in a moment? The attackers had to be within that green smoke, but the carriages were lined up there to act as a defensive structure. He couldn't see what was behind.

He immediately had his soldiers speed up, while his core party joined the battle as well. Two of the elite bats flew overhead to see what exactly was going on behind the carriages.

The image from the bats left Richard shocked. Behind the carriages was a row of about fifty dwarves. They had strange-

looking guns in hand, aiming at the desert warriors that were tens of metres away and pulling the triggers once more. Balls of lead were shot out of the flared mouths, forming a dark cloud that flew towards the desert warriors.

Countless tiny spurts of blood bloomed on the desert warriors' bodies. All of them looked stunned, but they couldn't stop themselves from falling off their horses. They had evidently never seen weapons like these before, and had no idea how to defend against them.

Even if one curled themselves up against their horse like they were dodging arrows, it was impossible to completely avoid an attack you couldn't see. The smell of smoke and the loud sounds left many of the horses chaotic as well, making them hard to control.

Up against a similar number of dwarves, an entire fifty desert warriors had been reduced to less than ten in two salvos.

Each of the dwarves had two long guns and two short ones. Done with the long guns, they skillfully pulled out their shorter ones and sent a concentrated wave of bullets towards the surviving warriors. The last of the opponent fell to the ground with a loud thud, the inertia leaving his body sliding across the ground to leave a red trail. The body ended up about three metres away from the closest dwarf.

He was just three metres away, but he no longer had the energy to cover that distance. A dull thump rang out as a leather boot covered in metal struck his head hard, sending him on his way.

“Dwarven gunmen!” Richard cried out involuntarily.

He had no time to wonder where these dwarves had come from, immediately ordering the troops on the frontlines to fight faster and harder. The right flank also charged forth with full strength.

The dwarven gunmen had tremendous might, but their weakness

was very obvious as well. Their guns took a long time to reload, and now that they were done with all four they were at their most vulnerable.

Sharp screeches rang out from the sky, and four elite bats pounced down and charged into the ranks of the gunmen, biting and tearing at them with their poisonous claws and teeth. A warrior of darkness appeared in their midst as well; summoning magic had much greater range than offensive magic.

Gangdor activated Gaia's Force and his strength rune, his bloodthirsty axe chopping away like the wind. Full-powered vertical chops were sending even his own heavy body jumping off the ground, and every strike rent a knight and his horse in two. The trolls were even more ferocious, crashing into the opponents in their way to send both man and horse flying.

They advanced side by side, quickly opening a path through the Red Cossack troops as they darted towards the carriages. Gangdor's large axe and Medium Rare's metal hammer hit the carriage in front at practically the same time, destroying it in one strike. They didn't have any time to make a detour because of Richard's command, choosing to just go through the obstacles.

With a new hole in the wall of carriages, an indistinct silhouette flashed past the two burly fellows. It was so quick it was unthinkable.

That was Waterflower. Although they were both angry at it, neither Gangdor nor Medium Rare could do anything about her speed. However, just as they were preparing to press on another figure brushed past them to enter the ranks of the dwarves.

Phaser!

Book 2, Chapter 197

Raging Flames(2)

Gangdor and Medium Rare exchanged a glance, leaping into the fray without another word to begin a wanton massacre. The four gods of death showed off their might, leaving most of the dwarves dead before the barbarians could even draw close.

Richard was astonished; he had never expected this situation. These dwarven gunmen were only level 5 on average, and without any ammunition in their guns his four followers were far too powerful for them to bear. Outside of Phaser who was stabbing enemies one by one, the rest were harvesting lives in batches.

“Leave a few of them alive!” Richard commanded immediately, both mentally and with a loud yell. Only then did they hold back.

Disregarding the accident with the dwarves, Richard had killed the great mage while most of the cavalry were exterminated as well. The Red Cossack caravan was at the end of the line, and all that was left was a one-sided massacre. Their leader had been level 14, but Gangdor, the trolls, Zendrall, and Waterflower had all ganged up on him in the middle of the battle. Having fought side by side for so long, the entire party had developed good chemistry. After the battle with Sinclair, they also knew to eliminate the opponent’s powerhouses first.

The battle ended very quickly. Most of the remaining guards and merchants chose to surrender, while those who were stubborn ended up dead. Richard’s army was normally full of enthusiasm for such massacres. They suffered few casualties, but many of the enemies had died. Even though Richard called for them to stop almost immediately, less than ten of the dwarven gunmen had survived.

Richard took his horse in a circle through the battlefield, studying the situation before giving out a stream of orders, “Check

the carriages, look for prisoners, heal the wounded! Also, bring me all the dwarves!”

The ten dwarven gunmen were pulled before Richard, all with huge bruises on their faces. Dwarves had terrible tempers and were very stubborn; they kept muttering under their breaths even after they were taken captive. Naturally, the desert warriors escorting them were no gentlemen. A few kicks and punches served well enough to calm them down.

“Who are you? Where did you come from? Why was a Red Cossack caravan here?” Richard asked in Faelor common.

All the dwarves began talking at once, but none of them were speaking in common so Richard did not understand a word. He immediately cast a language comprehension spell, listening hard for a long while before he barely understood the language.

These dwarves all came from the Ashen Plateau, one of the largest stretches of the dark world in Faelor. Deep into the Plateau were kingdoms of many non-human races. These fellows came from the largest dwarven tribe, the Anvil of Lightning.

A team of slavers from Red Cossack had run into the Anvil of Lightning, coercing them with alcohol, gold, and other luxury items to sell all their ore. A company of gunmen had also been sent out as mercenaries.

Richard frowned, pondering over what he had just learned. The dwarves were a huge race in Norland as well. Even there they could create and use guns, but theirs were far weaker than what he had just seen. The Anvil’s volleys were more powerful than those of his throwers! The throwers were comparable to level 8 warriors, and ordinary archers could not compare in equal numbers.

Richard’s eyes suddenly twinkled as he ordered a nearby guard to pass him some of the guns.

The barbarian quickly gave him one each of the long and short

guns. He eyed them carefully, quickly taking them apart. Moments later, the two guns had been reduced to a pile of parts. His studies at the Deepblue had been comprehensive and profound, dipping into various fields. Mechanics was one such field of study.

Having taken them apart, Richard found that these guns were quite different from those of Norland. They were far more complicated, requiring precise work and exquisite materials. The barrels required cutting, grinding, and other techniques unlike those in Norland, which were just a bunch of crude parts without much processing. The bore was made of an alloy he had never seen before, extremely resistant to high temperature and pressure, allowing it to hold more ammunition.

Richard was surprised as he fiddled with the guns in his hands. These weapons seemed nearly a millennium ahead of Norland's, in part because Norland's progress on guns was very slow. The current state of firearms back home was not much different than it was three centuries ago.

The grand mages of the Deepblue thought of dwarven guns as a joke. They were just coarse metal pipes crudely put on top of wooden handles. They were only effective within twenty metres, and even then only against leather and chainmail. A knight in full plate could completely disregard a gun's might.

As long as they were more than ten metres apart, a gun could not destroy the ranged defence barriers of a mage. However, given how slow gunmen moved, how could one even attempt to get so close to a mage? The mage would bombard them with fireballs before they could even approach, burning them to a crisp. Besides, even if they could get so close just pouncing on them and kicking them might have better effects. As for melee fighters, anyone who could shield themselves with their energy had no need to fear their minuscule power.

All he had learned about guns in the Deepblue was that they were tools the dwarves used to hunt wild animals, not useful against

even the more powerful magic beasts. They were a good invention, but their main use was in mining.

However, the guns from the Anvil of Lightning were very different. Richard had personally seen their tremendous power at a fifty-metre distance through the eyes of the elite bats. They already had the power to threaten weaker mages, being tenfold or perhaps even more powerful than those of Norland.

According to Richard's estimations, these guns had the offensive power of heavy infantry against even heavy cavalry with full-body armour as long as it was within twenty metres. These weapons were extremely powerful; even though they couldn't pierce armour, the mounts would still be lost. Even worse was the effect of the explosive sounds and the smoke. Normal horses would grow unsettled by both, growing hard to control. A cavalry assault against a concentrated formation of these gunmen was basically suicide.

Richard's throwers could threaten any heavy cavalry that was level 10 or below within fifty metres. However, while they held much higher power than the dwarves they could attack no more than ten times at most. The gunmen, on the other hand, could shoot continuously as long as they had enough loaded guns.

Book 2, Chapter 198

Transaction

Richard received a leather bag that his soldiers had found on one of the gunmen, opening it to find that it was full of gunpowder. He poured some into a bottle and placed it on a rock, moving far away before sending a wisp of fire out towards it.

BANG! The explosion was far louder than he had expected. The small bottle had destroyed the rock underneath, affecting even him who was a dozen metres away. The shrapnel even cut a few of the barbarians who were standing too close.

This explosion told him all he needed to know. This was obviously a new formula of gunpowder, several times more powerful than what Norland's dwarves used. This was the reason those guns were so tremendously powerful.

He called Flowsand over, passing the guns and powder for a look as he spoke in awe, "I never thought there would be something on Faelor that was more advanced than on Norland."

Flowsand sensed the vigilance and worry within his words. These guns might just be the start; the dwarves might have all sorts of puppets or strange machines that worked with this gunpowder as a base.

This was a system of power not much weaker than Norland's. Faelor already had legendary beings, and so far it didn't seem much weaker outside of a lack of runes and the absence of the Eternal Dragon. Norland's magic was much more developed, yes, but the endless fighting with countless planes had already told them that magic was not the only high-ranking power system.

Flowsand took a close look at every part of the guns and then at the gunpowder, flipping through the Book of Time for a few moments before she spoke up, "Indeed, these guns are far more

powerful than those on Norland. However, we probably don't need to worry too much. Think about it. Norland's dwarves are a powerful race that occupy a lot of land. They also have several large empires. Don't you remember what the dwarven tribes are known for?"

Being quite knowledgeable himself, Richard immediately answered, "The foundation of the dwarves' combat is in their warriors, crusaders, and clerics."

"Mm. Guns are not their forte, so they have no need for them."

This left him deep in thought, "You mean to say that Norland's advanced magic and melee combat systems stunted the growth of guns?"

Flowsand raised the gun in her hands, "These guns are powerful, yes, but in Norland they would still be used in the same way. Their only use would be to deal with monsters."

"You should know that it's easy to find a dozen great mages in Norland. In front of such a force, any number of dwarven gunmen is just a bunch of cannon fodder holding metal sticks."

A moment of thought later, Richard shook his head, "That might not be the case. These guns might not affect battles between powerhouses, but they can certainly change the situation on a battlefield. If there's enough of them they become just like my throwers, gaining unthinkable power. They can also bring nightmares to the enemy in certain special situations like fort defense."

"Also, don't forget that this is Faelor. Nobody here can pull out a dozen great mages so easily."

Turning back to the dwarves, he asked about the situation with the Anvil of Lightning and found that it was a large tribe with hundreds of thousands of people. They had 'uncountable' guns. Dwarves as a race were quite reluctant to deal with numbers, so

none of these fellows in front of him could give him a precise range. The only thing he could infer was that they had a lot of these weapons.

Hearing that, he instructed for the dwarven gunmen to be imprisoned. He would take his time to process all this before taking a decision.

By the time Richard was done with the questioning, the battlefield had already been cleaned up. The caravan had been transporting rare ores mined by the Anvil of Lightning, an entire dozen different types ranging from refined iron to mithril and even spherulite steel. If these ores could be taken to the Sequoia Kingdom they would sell for over 200,000 gold coins, and the entire cost of buying these ores and transporting it would sum up to a mere 20,000!

As expected, one could earn back ten times as much as they spent when travelling through the Bloodstained Lands!

Richard's path to the Sequoia Kingdom was blocked for now; he would have to go through several organisations in Bluewater to sell these goods off. The Iron Triangle Empire was not far away, but it was also the main base of Red Cossack. He wasn't so stupid as to rob their caravan and dispose of the stolen goods at the source.

This battle had given Richard a whole new understanding of the value of the Bloodstained Lands, especially with its adjacency to the Ashen Plateau and the barbarians' ancestral plains. He even found a few large magic crystal ores within the carriages! If they were cut into standard size, there were over 70 to be had! This would allow the broodmother to create a new type of grade 5 troop, or unlock another grade 5 upgrade. It was enough to make a dozen elementary runes as well!

Most important was the information that there was a deposit of magic crystals in the Anvil of Lightning's lands. This caused Richard to grow even more interested in the dwarves.

There were a hundred survivors from the caravan. Richard ordered for them to be released, allowing them to spread news of him having appeared in the Bloodstained Lands once more. He wasn't specifically merciful nor was he addicted to killing, and he was starting to find a harmony between the two. However, this specific act was not to ease the tensions between him and Red Cossack. The memories of being pursued around the Bloodstained Lands were still ever-present, and he was resolved to wipe the group off the map of the Bloodstained Lands.

It was impossible to keep one's power hidden if they wished to gain profits in the Bloodstained Lands. Disabling or eliminating a powerful organisation was the best method of proving your strength.

Having dealt with everything, Richard sent one of his guards rushing straight for Bluewater to get in touch with a few important people. He needed to be flexible to deal with such a large group, and that was not possible with dozens of carriages of goods.

The next five days were spent quietly as Richard travelled to Bluewater Oasis once more. He met a few old friends at the same hotel he had auctioned his runes in. Although Bluewater had endured a baptism of blood by Sinclair, these old fellows were knowledgeable people. All of them were completely fine.

Devon was evidently much fatter than before. He said it was because nothing good had happened lately, that he could only eat good food for physical pleasure to fill the void in his soul. The more depressed he became, the fatter he got.

Amon's temperament had grown sharpened, while Bivier looked to be worried about something. Kellac seemed to be even more interested in Richard himself, not even bothering to hide his curiosity as he constantly observed him. Thankfully the fellow had some self-control, not doing something like casting a detection spell.

The meal didn't take much time; the main event would only come after. Once the table was cleaned up. Richard took out a box and placed it on the table, "This is a sample of my most recent harvest, see if any of you have a need for it."

Book 2, Chapter 199

Transaction(2)

The box was separated into over ten small compartments, each containing an ore sample with a note attached stating the quantity. Bivier's eyes lit up at the sight; being someone from the ore business in the first place, he did not need the information on the note to notice the quality. He didn't immediately express an opinion, simply picking up each sample and carefully identifying it. He seemed so serious it was like he was playing with a lover's breast.

Devon stretched out his fat hand, grabbing a piece of ore to fiddle about with as he spoke almost carelessly, "I heard that one of Red Cossack's second-class caravans was robbed recently, and it was delivering various rare and precious ores."

Richard knocked the box with a hand, saying with a gentle voice, "Aren't they all here?"

"So it was you! You have guts!" Devon gave him a meaningful look.

Richard smiled in response, "When I first came to the Bloodstained Lands, a group of men under my command were essentially all killed by Red Cossack. I sent someone over to negotiate, and the response I got a few months ago was war. They sent thousands of horse bandits after my life. Pity; all they accomplished in the end was losing hundreds of their men. Since they started it first, it would be improper to refrain from a response."

"Those fellows are all deadly criminals," Devon stated.

"Deadly criminals, eh? Might as well make them dead," Richard joked coldly with a light smile.

"This issue between you and Red Cossack... If it needed to come

to an end,” Amon asked indifferently, “I mean if, how would you put an end to it?”

“Their offence is too grave,” Richard replied, “It won’t be that easy to forgive. The only way to end the hatred is if I see the head of the idiot who made the decision to come for my life.”

“It really is unwise to provoke you,” the old man said with a shrug.

Everyone here was experienced and could tell that Richard wasn’t just looking for revenge. His real aim in taking on Red Cossack was to establish his own power in the Bloodstained Lands.

“Then this batch of goods...” Richard looked around, waiting for everyone’s decision.

“If all this was shipped to the human kingdoms, it could sell for as much as 280,000 gold at market price. I don’t care why you didn’t send these things to the Sequoia Kingdom, but this is the Bloodstained Lands and these goods once belonged to Red Cossack. The highest price I can give is 40%, but the good thing is I can buy it all.”

Bivier’s price wasn’t bad, but Devon followed up with something better, “I can offer 50%. Anything to make Red Cossack suffer a loss.”

“Then it’s up to you.” Bivier would not offer a higher price.

Richard muttered to himself for a moment before speaking, “55%, but half that can be replaced with barbarian slaves.”

The Golden Warflag was just as big in the slave trade as Red Cossack. Richard’s suggestion wasn’t bad in Devon’s eyes: considering the profit he made off barbarians, he would end up paying less than 50% of the market price for the ores.

He gave Richard a deeply meaningful look, “Good! You don’t have to worry about the quality of the slaves, you’ll be able to see them tomorrow.”

70,000 gold coins. If Devon wanted to take care of Richard, he could get eighty strong, young barbarians. Barbarians were natural warriors; with the proper equipment their power would range from level 8-10. With these slaves added to his army, Richard's power would rise again.

Once the transaction was completed, Richard and Amon agreed on a time for his visit to Rolf. The Sword Saint had gotten one of the two runes he had sold before and he clearly wanted more, so he had put aside a little of his pride to meet up with Richard.

With the business taken care of, Kellac asked about the battle at Twilight Castle. Everyone immediately showed an expression of great interest.

Sinclair and her bearguard knights had been completely annihilated in the battle of Twilight Castle, but the details were not known to many. The nobles of the Sequoia Kingdom would not pay much attention to a battle in a barony; many stranger things had happened in the Direwolf Duke's lands. In the eyes of the great nobles, any intruder that could be eliminated by a baron was far too weak.

As for the defeat of the allied armies under Salwyn, it was clearly because they were far too useless. Baron Fontaine was a well-known commander and swordsman, having been undefeated for many years even as he grew his territory. With him even dying in battle here, people naturally attributed most of the credit to him.

However, those of the Bloodstained Lands only believed in power. They had first-hand experience of Sinclair's power, having lost tens of thousands of lives and even saint-level powerhouses. They did not believe a word of the nobility, so only Richard who had personally experienced the battle could tell them the truth. Even if he hid some things, it would still be much more believable than the words of the nobles. Moreover, in the eyes of people like Kellac and Amon, just the tainted scrolls Richard had taken out previously meant he was most likely the key to Sinclair's death and

defeat.

Richard muttered to himself, rapidly analysing all sorts of possibilities in his mind before he spoke, “Truth be told, Sinclair was already seriously injured at the start of the battle...”

He recounted the events of the day, but made some ‘minor’ changes. Of course he wouldn’t mention the broodmother, and he left out many key details about his own men even as he weakened Sinclair through injuries. He also overstated Fontaine’s personal strength and the quality of his troops. Yet, despite all that, it took him ten whole minutes to describe the thrilling battle.

Everyone in the room held their breath. Those with power and a keen eye secretly tried to verify his words, but a lie painted by someone with the blessings of wisdom and truth could not be caught so easily.

A moment later, Kellac spoke up with a hoarse voice, “Mr Richard, I heard that there is a young and promising cleric by your side?”

“You mean Flowsand? Yes, she is devout and pure in her faith. Why, do you have an interest in her?” Richard answered. Already having a deep understanding of Faelor, he knew her identity as a cleric was the best cover for his identity as an invader.

“I was once a priest myself,” Kellac said slowly, “but that is a long time ago. I heard you needed mercenaries recently; the Demon Hunting Spears have many competent fighters. If you’re interested, we can find time for a private discussion later today.”

Richard was a little surprised. From what he knew, the Demon Hunting Spears had few members but every one was exceptionally strong. They rarely accepted employment, even more so to venture deep into the Bloodstained Lands. However, Kellac was clearly not talking about mere employment, but instead a deeper cooperation.

Without any reason to reject, Richard nodded in reply, “I would

welcome that very much!”

Book 2, Chapter 200

Secret Of Sunset

Once night fell, Kellac visited Richard at his residence. Being notified of this in advance, a barbarian warrior brought him to the backyard where he met Richard in a visitors' area.

Richard had returned to Bluewater a new man, his army now a decisive force. With Sinclair having visited the oasis before, even if the buildings on his lands at the fringe of the city were fine the servants had either died or escaped. For now, he had booked the entire inn he had stayed in before.

The original customers could only begrudgingly accept being moved elsewhere. This was a strong and thought-provoking hint: the Golden Warflag was not afraid of anyone and did not care for gold.

With him robbing the second-class caravan, everyone in Bluewater now knew of Richard's grudge with Red Cossack. Some even thought back to his battle the first time he had arrived here; even though this mage was still very young, his ferocity did not lose out to veterans who had been here for many years. Nobody dared to come out and blame him, only able to fling shade at him from behind his back.

As per Kellac's request, Flowsand was present alongside Richard. The only one outside of the three was Phaser, who was stood by the side of the hall covered from head to toe with a cape and helmet. Kellac's eyes had glimmered with fear upon first seeing her, a shocked expression on his face as he couldn't contain himself for a moment.

Phaser did not reveal any part of her skin, with even the lower part of her face covered in shadows. She felt two spots on her body burn as Kellac's gaze landed upon her, as if scorching iron had been placed on her person. Shaking uncontrollably, she took a step

back as her bladed left hand trembled slightly, letting out a threatening low buzz.

Richard felt a sense of danger stirring in his heart at this sight, but he did not let it show on his face. “What’s wrong, Mr. Kellac?” he asked, “Are you interested in my guard?”

Kellac looked deeply at Phaser once more before retracting his gaze, shaking his head in response, “I would never have thought I would see a warrior of the Sunset Shrine here. And she’s even your guard! I haven’t even heard of a sunset warrior being a guard.”

“Sunset warrior? I’ve never heard of this before, could you please explain?” Richard asked with an inquisitive expression. He could faintly sense a strong aura from Kellac’s body. This fellow was supposed to be a mere level 11-12 mage, which would not give him any pressure. However, it was as though a shroud of mist enveloped his entire being, leaving Richard unable to see through him. As such, Richard would not take him lightly.

Kellac did not answer immediately, squinting at Richard as though he was trying to determine whether he was speaking the truth, “How did you find this guard?”

“Coincidence. She needed a job, so I asked her to come and work for me.” He naturally wouldn’t reveal that Phaser was a special unit made by the broodmother. There was an implication in his words that he was unwilling to reveal much about Phaser’s background, and if Kellac was smart enough to read between the lines he would drop the matter.

Kellac nodded, the doubt in his face slowly fading. He raised his head and looked at the large round moon out the window, saying slowly after a second, “The history of the Sunset Shrine can be traced back to a long time ago, when the astral beasts invaded. That time was a huge disaster; these beasts of unknown origin defeated almost every legendary being of the plane. They wanted to pour their energy into it, turning it into an astral plane. If the

pathway had been constructed, Faelor would slowly be changed by this energy.

“Failing to suppress them indirectly, the gods eventually joined the battle personally. Paying a heavy price, they finally managed to kill all the invading astral beasts. Not only did the God of War descend to fight himself, several other gods were injured as well. The one who was injured the most was the Lady of the Night.”

“The Lady of the Night? Didn’t she go missing in that battle?” Richard asked. He had seen written accounts about her in Essien’s diary. The battle with the astral beasts had killed almost all the powerhouses of Faelor, leaving a part of the continent in ruins. A greater god was destroyed, while a number of other deities were injured. A few of those whose injuries were more serious had gone missing.

“That isn’t the truth. The Lady of the Night did not go missing, the battle caused her to fall. With her divine kingdom damaged, she had no choice but to give up her divinity for a mortal incarnation as she found a way to slowly recover. However, the God of Day took the chance to send out his most elite soldiers, successfully killing the Lady of the Night.

“Once the battle came to an end, the paladins who had done most of the work were found guilty of blasphemy, with orders given out for their capture and execution. One of the gods that gave out this order was the God of Day.”

Richard’s mouth twitched slightly. He wanted to ask a question, but he held his tongue. Abandonment and sacrifice were a common act amongst nobles, and apparently it wasn’t uncommon between gods either. In both cases, it was always dressed up in a righteous cause.

Kellac paused for a while before continuing, “The paladins were left with no room for survival. They were originally the God of Day’s most elite soldiers, and were each granted some divine

power to help them kill the Lady of the Night. When they were successful, they had obtained some of her divine power as well. When the gods gave the order to capture and kill them, they ultimately chose to resist.

“There were a total of 119 paladins. They fought in various corners of the continent for several years, breaking through encirclement countless times through numerous wars both small and big. Because their combined power of day and night, as well as their fallen status, they were called the warriors of the Sunset Shrine. The entire process of their pursuit was an apocalyptic war that followed right after the battle against the astral beasts. It was only after the last of them died that order was restored. Two legendary powerhouses had fallen at their hands, and so many saints that it was impossible to count.

“Battle after battle, a majority of the sunset warriors channelled their rage into curses that allowed their powers to be passed down through rituals. Even with the original 119 destroyed, they had scattered their seeds of hatred and vengeance all over the plane. People occasionally awaken the power of the Sunset Shrine, obtaining the powers they passed on. These are the greatest of heretics; some just pass things on in secret, but many became infamous in the mainland. Some others just go into hiding, secretly choosing to conserve their energy.”

Book 2, Chapter 201

Secret Of Sunset(2)

Having heard this, Richard asked an important question, “Why would the God of Day want to attack the Lady of the Night?”

“When the Lady of the Night fell, her divinity and power were absorbed by him. This allowed him to jump from a lesser deity to an intermediate one, and at the same time he changed his name. He is now known as the God of Time, Runai.”

This was confidential information. If this was true, it was undoubtedly one of the biggest secrets of the entire plane. If news were to spread, one would definitely arouse Runai’s wrath. And judging from how the sunset warriors had been treated, it was evident that the gods of Faelor would not like these rumours.

“Why do you think my guard is from the Sunset Shrine? Look, she’s still very weak.” Although he knew Phaser wasn’t from the Sunset Shrine, Richard was intrigued by this mysterious group Kellac had spoken of. If his words were true, they would be a natural ally to him in Faelor. The only unknown was whether they valued the gods or the plane more.

“The combination of darkness and divinity. It’s a common characteristic of the sunset warriors, and a unique one.”

Divinity was not something just anyone would be allowed to possess. A commoner with divinity was like a beggar with a bag of gold; the gods would undoubtedly intervene.

Richard frowned, gently tapping his hand on the table as he asked, “The Sunset Shrine seems to be the primary target of the gods. Since you think my guard is a sunset warrior, should I be worried about priests and paladins knocking on my door in the near future?”

Kellac’s mouth twitched, settling into a bitter smile, “The

divinity of the sunset warriors rests deep in their souls. Even the gods cannot find them. Strong or weak, the only way to sense the existence of a sunset warrior is if you are one yourself.”

Richard was astounded by this revelation, “So you are...”

Kellac nodded, his gaze returning to Phaser, “Sir Richard, can you hand your guard over to me? I can guide her, and help her realise her true potential as someone of the Sunset Shrine.”

“Not possible,” Richard answered without hesitation. Phaser was the spawn of the broodmother; her darkness came from Sinclair, while her divinity came from various ancestral idols. She was definitely not a sunset warrior, so there was no potential for Kellac to bring out. Besides, she was already level 6 now, and would soon be an essential member of his party in the future. How could he hand her over to him? Whatever conditions he was thinking of, there was no room for discussion.

Kellac was obviously unhappy, he tried over and over to sound Richard out, but Richard was adamant. He was left with no choice but to drop the subject.

“Alright then, Mr. Kellac,” Richard changed the topic, “Let’s discuss that partnership with the Demon Hunting Spears. No need to worry, my lips are sealed about what I just heard.” He glanced at Phaser who had withdrawn into a corner, “If anything, I will do it for her.”

Kellac leaned back with a strange smile, “I trust you completely. Now, Sir Richard, what do you want?”

Richard got straight to the point, “I’m in urgent need of a dependable group of elite soldiers.”

Kellac nodded his head, passing a scroll to Richard, “The Demon Hunting Spears have a total of about 700 men, the weakest of us being level 6. They are loyal and trustworthy: this scroll contains details about them and their corresponding rates. However, the

key to our partnership is not in gold, but the tainted scrolls you sold to me last time.”

“The tainted divine scrolls?” Richard had his doubts. He reached out to grab the scroll on offer, starting to inspect its contents.

Before Kellac could explain, Flowsand suddenly broke her silence, “Was your divine power burnt a long time ago?”

Kellac’s body shook all of a sudden, leaving him feeling incredulous. He raised his head, his hawk eyes giving Flowsand a death stare. The cleric’s eyes had turned dark as ink, but deep in her pupils was a pale gold glimmer. He felt as though his very soul had turned crystal clear under her gaze, all his secrets out in the open.

He managed to calm himself down quickly, “Indeed. I was once a high priest for the Highland Wargod, twenty years ago. I offended another deity, and was punished by the burning of my divine power. I was lucky to have survived.”

Richard suddenly looked up from the scroll and stared at Kellac, “Don’t you have to be at least level 16 to be called a high priest?”

“I was level 17 at the time.”

“A level 17 priest surviving the burning of his divine power? It’s simply a miracle!” Flowsand exclaimed. As a cleric herself, she knew clearly how unbelievable such a thing was. Even a level 7 cleric whose divine power was burned would be left half dead; it was unheard of for someone above level 10 to be able to survive the process.

“It’s because I was also a sunset warrior. The divinity hidden within saved me at the most crucial moment, but because of that most of my divine power faded away,” Kellac laughed bitterly.

Flowsand’s gaze roamed about as she asked, “So then, you need a new religion?”

Kellac hesitated. It seemed hard for him to make the decision,

but eventually he nodded his head.

“My body is currently broken beyond repair, my life almost at an end. If I do not acquire the grace of a new god, I will not live to see the next year. However, I have a few unfulfilled wishes, I need to live on.”

He only grew more and more resolute as he spoke, “I inspected those tainted scrolls. If I am not wrong, that batch of scrolls came from a new power. This power is not amongst the current pantheon, so it likely comes from a new demigod. If I get the favour of this demigod and a new lease of life on my divine power, I can continue to fulfil my wishes. So long as this new god’s requirements do not contradict my wishes, I am willing to serve.”

Hearing what Kellac had to say, Flowsand opened her mouth to speak but was stopped by Richard. Richard looked Kellac in the eye, asking, “What would you offer to your new god?”

Kellac had long since been prepared for this question, “I was a powerful priest after all. If I garner the favour of this new god, I will grow very swiftly in level. With enough grace, it is not impossible for me to recover completely. A high priest in the mortal world can be of great use to a new deity.

“Secondly, outside of my unfulfilled wishes, I will give my body and soul to my new Lord. The entirety of my subordinates in the Demon Hunting Spears will be at His disposal, and we will dress in the church’s colours.”

Book 2, Chapter 202

Refugee

Richard and Flowsand looked at each other. Kellac had been an unexpected surprise, a gargantuan one. If all he said was true, and he really could regain his powers as a high priest, he would be a great boon for Richard's growth. Flowsand nodded in response to Richard's inquisitive gaze; she could do this.

Richard's heart was thus set at ease, and he asked Kellac one last question, "Now then, what were those unfulfilled wishes?"

Kellac fell silent for a while, his face contorting as he recalled unpleasant memories. He eventually let out a long sigh, "I wish for the crucifixion and burning of Cardinal Markville of the Highland Wargod!"

The Highland Wargod was a lesser deity, so a cardinal of his would normally be around level 16, maybe level 15 in the best case. Of course, the level was not the biggest problem. Burning a cardinal at the stake was basically declaring a crusade against their deity!

Richard continued his questioning, finding out that Markville had originally been a level 17 high priest just like Kellac. The source of their enmity was not important; all he'd needed to know was whether Kellac's wishes contradicted the will of the Eternal Dragon.

Richard nodded his head towards Flowsand and she spoke up, "The master I serve, his name is the Dragon of Eternity and Light."

"What?!" Kellac involuntarily cried out.

He immediately realised that he had lost his self-control, but the name that Flowsand uttered was far too shocking. If this was really the god's title, then it wasn't some new demigod but a deity whose powers transcended Faelor itself!

The Book of the Gods ensured that Kellac was well aware of the deeper systems of the plane. He knew the laws of Faelor would not allow for such a powerful god to exist.

If Flowsand was telling the truth, there was only one possibility. However, she could not be lying, because that was a meaningless act. He would naturally feel the presence of this new god when he converted.

Kellac's mouth contorted and his voice suddenly grew hoarse, "The Dragon of Eternity and Light... This is a god from a different plane!"

"Not a different plane," Flowsand corrected him, "He reigns supreme over many."

Kellac inhaled a deep breath, "But... There is essentially no difference! You lot are invaders!"

"Yes, we come from another plane. However, a majority of the pantheon on Faelor won't accept you," Flowsand pointed out harshly. She had some understanding of Faelor's gods by now.

Kellac painfully closed his eyes, his face warping. He was already prepared when he spoke the truth about the Sunset Shrine, prepared even before he took a step through the door. He knew there would be a bumpy road ahead, where he could follow a new deity's transcendence or even witness the blasphemy of killing a god. However, the truth was always more frightening than what one expected. This unbelievably mighty god would allow his wishes to come to fruition easier, but these invaders clashed with his beliefs. It was an extremely difficult decision to make.

It took a long struggle before he finally spoke again, "Yes, indeed... I... I am willing to worship the Dragon of Eternity and Light."

Having said that, he leaned back into his chair, sweating profusely. He looked very weak, as though he was suffering from a

grave illness.

Flowsand stood up, a stern expression on her face, “You will not be disappointed! Follow me, we can start the ceremony now.”

The ceremony was held in Flowsand’s room, the altar was a piece of wood that had been nailed crudely to a wooden frame, the workmanship shoddy. Kars and Marvin served as assistants, while Richard was the only spectator.

Flowsand placed the Book of Time on the wood, giving Kellac a quick summary of the Eternal Dragon’s teachings, his domain, and his blessings. The old dragon’s teachings were actually quite simple, with almost no specifics. In other words, there were no lengthy codices to solidify the religion, most of the information passed on being related to sacrifices and blessings.

These teachings truly left Kellac surprised, but after seeing the cold divine might being emitted by the Book of Time he immediately turned serious. Every type of power in nature could be fabricated, but not the power of the gods.

A faint gold glimmer started flowing from the Book of Time under the melodious sound of Flowsand’s chants. She motioned for Kellac to step forward, kneeling in front of the Book of Time and stretching out his hands to receive the divine power. Kellac was so excited his entire body started trembling as he complied with all her instructions.

The pale gold glimmer exploded onto Kellac’s hands like a rain of gold. His body immediately shook as he felt a cold, metallic divine power roll through his body. His dry, cracked soul screamed, absorbing the divine power that it had not seen for a long time. The wounds to his soul slowly closed up.

The ash-black on Kellac’s face was washed away by the cleansing might, the face that resembled an old tree bark slowly swelling up as several deep wrinkles flattened out. All his bones started crackling, his body growing in size.

Kellac was completely transformed by the divine power, and his powers were returning just as quickly. It wasn't long before he had passed level 10, and he didn't seem to show any signs of slowing down.

Small beads of sweat had started forming on Flowsand's forehead but she continued the constant chant, controlling the sparks flying out from the Book of Time towards Kellac's hands. This process was taking longer than expected, but it was also the most important. It was only now that Kellac would grow so quickly; once the ceremony came to an end, he would have to regain his power bit by bit like anyone else. As long as he could absorb the power of time, she had to persist.

The pale gold energy had slowly spread to Kellac's waist, covering the top half of his body. A blinding glow suddenly radiated from his shirt, seemingly plating the entire room in gold.

For a moment, it seemed like that gold glimmer had absorbed all the power of time. The portion of his shirt quickly turned dark, decaying into ashes. This was the power of time; it might not be as violent as a burning flame, but its might was unstoppable. Who could weather the passage of time?

All of Kellac's clothes were corroded in an instant. Some expensive magical artifacts, including powerful scrolls, could not resist the flow of time and were completely destroyed. The only exception was a small scroll, which instead of fading away started to absorb more and more power from its surroundings. It turned red hot, eventually looking like a brand that burnt a part of Kellac's skin in the blink of an eye. He was forced to retreat involuntarily, but the scroll remained in its original position, floating in mid-air.

Book 2, Chapter 203

The Sight Of Divine Grace

Richard watched the scroll that was burning with the power of time with a look of shock. He could faintly feel that the material was similar to what the Book of Holding was made of, able to withstand the erosion of time.

On the other hand, Flowsand looked at the scroll with surprise. She even stopped in the middle of her chant, quickly asking Kellac, “What is this?”

Kellac endured the pain that came from the power of time altering his body, speaking with clenched teeth, “This is the Book of the Gods. It has records of the divine power of almost every true god in Faelor’s pantheon. It is a divine artefact left behind by the Sunset Shrine. The gods of Faelor regard its owner to be the greatest heretic on the plane. You must be careful, do not open it! It can only be opened without the gods noticing through a special method and spell.”

Flowsand reached out and took the scroll, ignoring Kellac’s advice as she opened the scroll. Her amber eyes released constant ripples of pale gold, the power of time binding the divine auras without letting any spill out.

Carefully reading through it from cover to cover, Flowsand asked. “This is how you figured out that my tainted scrolls didn’t come from Faelor’s gods?”

“That’s right,” Kellac nodded his head.

The Book of the Gods was still continuously absorbing the power of time. Even though Flowsand was not singing anymore, pale gold light still poured out of the Book of Time as though it was drawn by the scroll.

Flowsand’s eyes grew brighter and brighter, and in the end she

spoke to Kellac in a stately, solemn voice, “The Book of the Gods would not be a bad offering to the Eternal Dragon. Sacrifice it to him, and you will receive a divine gift. So, Kellac, are you willing to offer the Book of the Gods to the Eternal Dragon?”

To a devout worshipper, this would be something that went without saying. However, Kellac struggled for a long time before expressing his will to offer it. That was how precious the Book of the Gods was to him.

The Book of the Gods was the only reason Kellac remained above level 10 even though his divine power had been burnt. At the same time, it was the origin of the power of many of the heretic clerics under him. They were not true unbelievers, just people who shifted the target of their faith to the Book of the Gods. Because the Book contained the divine power of Faelor’s gods, it could also faintly accept the power of faith and bestow divine power in return. Of course it could not compare to a real god, or even a demigod for that matter, but this ability still gave it the right to be called a divine tool.

With Kellac’s consent, Flowsand started another incantation. The light coming from the Book of Time suddenly grew ten times as intense, the intense pale gold converging into what seemed like a solid pillar that shone straight towards the ceiling. However, it seemed to hit an invisible barrier near the top and quietly disappear. It wasn’t just the ceiling; even if the entire room was filled with the power of time, not a bit spilt out.

The Book of the Gods bobbed up and down within that pillar of time, slowly falling towards the Book of Time until it eventually became a single page that turned into a part of the book.

A distant and desolate aura, one with an indescribable imposition, suddenly descended upon the room. This was the will of the Eternal Dragon; although it hadn’t descended with its actual body, this will was no weaker than the one in the Church of the Eternal Dragon. This was a great sacrifice that satisfied the Eternal

Dragon, enough that its will crossed an unknown amount of spacetime to absorb the offering and bestow a blessing.

With the Dragon's aura pervading the room, the neverending light pouring out of the Book of Time grew even more turbulent. It all converged together, eventually condensing into two pale gold balls of light that floated in the air. Three smaller points of gold floated up and down nearby.

Watching the balls of light floating in the air, Kellac suddenly felt a dryness in his mouth. His heart almost leapt out of his chest, as he clearly felt that one of these balls belonged to him. It was very likely that it hid what he had dreamt of for so many years!

Flowsand's unique hoarse voice rang out once more, startling Kellac from his reverie, "Kellac, the Eternal Dragon is very satisfied with your sacrifice, so he exerted a great deal of divine power to break through the plane's seal, bestowing a generous gift upon you. Go, take that which is yours!"

Kellac took a deep breath, stretching his hand out towards the ball of light that was his. The sudden influx of information almost stopped his heart!

Divine blessing— Spring of Life. For thirty years, his body would not age.

Kellac immediately understood the significance of this blessing: it was an additional thirty years of life! No god in Faelor's history could extend their worshippers' lives! There were other ways to prolong life, like becoming a lich, but there was nothing that did not require a great sacrifice. A longer life gave one the chance to make miracles happen!

Once the Spring of Life took effect, the ball of light dimmed until it was only a tenth as bright as before. However, the power of time still surged into Kellac's body. By the time it disappeared completely, he was already a level 13 fallen cleric. Outside of the Spring of Life, this was another divine gift.

Divine Blessing— Excitation. It was a gift bestowed upon priests of the Eternal Dragon, using the power of time to immediately increase their power anywhere between one and three levels. At the same time as he had received the much-needed Spring of Time, the remaining divine grace had raised Kellac's power by two levels.

The other ball of light belonged to Flowsand. The sacrifice had left the Eternal Dragon very satisfied, so the cleric who conducted the ceremony would also gain a certain amount of divine grace. This was the fastest method for those of the Church of the Eternal Dragon to raise their level. However, when Flowsand reached out to touch the ball of light, she started to hesitate.

Before her were a number of options for the blessing, but she could only choose one. She quickly filtered out most of the options, but could not make a choice between two. One was the same blessing Kellac had been bestowed, Excitation, while the other, Eternal Passage I, would strengthen the Book of Time. The divine grace that was supposed to belong to her would be transformed into a pure power of time that could be absorbed by the Book of Time, increasing its powers. The most visible effect was that it would become easier to communicate with the Eternal Dragon, and any spells that used the Book of Time would be strengthened.

Looking at it from the point of view of strengthening herself, Flowsand's choice would naturally be Excitation. This blessing would immediately allow her to grow three levels. Although Eternal Passage I could also increase the might of her spells, it was nowhere near as effective.

Book 2, Chapter 204

The Sight Of Divine Grace(2)

However, Flowsand knew that Eternal Passage I had two more hidden effects. One of them allowed her to gain more grace during sacrifices. As her channel to the Eternal dragon grew more stable, the loss of power during a sacrifice would naturally decrease. The other was that it could transform the Book of Time into a proper altar in the future, one that could replace the Lighthouse of Time. if the Core of Time blessing was used to further enhance the Book of Time, it would become a temporary Lighthouse. As the Book of Time continued to strengthen, it would be granted a special gift from the Eternal Dragon, the coordinates of a primary plane!

She could go back to Norland! Although they could only build a temporary passageway that had limited effectiveness, it was a way back home!

Looking at the dozens of other gifts on the list, Flowsand could not help but clench her teeth. It wasn't like the remaining options were useless, but Excitation and Eternal Passageway I were the most effective in their current situation where they were lost amongst the myriad planes.

Other circumstances would have made some of these gifts equally attractive or even better. For example, the gift of wisdom would permanently improve one's intellect. A commoner could become a genius, while a genius would become a polymath. The blessing would immediately place her on the same level as Richard.

Another example was the divine gift, Reincarnation. It was a set of weapons that could trigger the power of time. This was a set, not a single piece. Even the current Flowsand would be as strong as a level 18 high priest if she wore the set!

Flowsand had obtained a limited amount of divine grace, and she could only exchange it for the weakest component of the set: the

Necklace of Spring. Even that she could not get a whole version of, only a flawed piece that could just slightly increase the effect of time-related techniques. It also slowed down the wearer's aging slightly, and had a supplementary grade 4 healing spell that could be used up to thrice a day.

However, Flowsand could see all the components of Reincarnation in the list, especially their effects. She was left clenching her teeth again.

Another attraction was the divine gift, Heavenly Guardian. It would form a divine warrior from the power of time to act as the guard of the recipient. Heavenly Guardians were not puppets; they had wisdom comparable to human geniuses, but their loyalty to their master was unshakeable. They would start around level 12, able to grow to level 16 through battle or divine power. There were further stages to this gift, increasing the number of guardians and the limit to their level. One could obtain a loyal level 20 guard after choosing it thrice!

If there was sufficient grace, the conductor could even obtain an entire troop of level 20 guardians! Even many normal legendary powerhouses would not willingly provoke such a group.

If only there were sufficient divine grace... Flowsand clenched her teeth even tighter, the sound of grinding teeth audible to everyone present.

“What’s wrong?” Richard asked, sensing the change in her.

“We... we’re too poor!” she said through gritted teeth.

“Poor?” Richard was puzzled.

Flowsand’s chest heaved rapidly. She simply closed her eyes, taking a deep breath as she fiercely chose Eternal Passageway I. When she opened her eyes and looked at Richard again, a murderous aura was flowing out of her.

Richard grew even more confused, but past experience told him

that now was not the time to ask.

The sentence was still lingering around in Flowsand's head: If only there were sufficient divine grace.

The Church of the Eternal Dragon was accustomed to extensions of life as a measure of divine grace. The divine grace needed to summon a Heavenly Guardian was enough to prolong one's life for an extra fifteen years. This required a sacrifice that was comparable to a greater devil. The majority of greater devils were at or above level 18, and at least three were needed for a level 20 guardian!

Devils were not sheep; they could not be caught as one wished. Even Gaton treasured the greater devil's skull he possessed.

However! If five more greater devils could be offered up, the guardian could be raised by another level to level 21. This was crossing from the saint realm to become a legendary being! A mere nine greater devils could be exchanged for a legendary guard. The sacrificer would benefit greatly in this exchange!

Flowsand could not remain calm any longer, her breath growing heated at the thought of a legendary guard.

"What happened?" Richard could not help but ask again.

The rest of her retinue were shocked by the formidable power of their god. Not knowing Flowsand well enough, they only felt their young leader's expression grew more solemn, not noticing the undercurrents.

"You don't know!" Flowsand raged, leaving Richard bewildered.

She could not pay attention to his feelings right now. She was roaring in her heart, as though an ancient beast had emerged from deep within her, 'Don't let me see it! You damned old coot! You obviously knew what I needed, and you know I don't have so much divine grace. Why did you let me see so many gifts? Do I have to collect offerings my entire life, living for you? Damn you! But...

Ugh, I really want those things... Fine, you win! You damned old dragon, curse you!’

Regardless of her cursing, the Eternal Dragon would last through all time, unmoved by her anger. Even if she dedicated all of the world’s most malicious words his way, she still had to work obediently to collect more offerings and sacrifice them to him.

The many options were a habit of the Eternal Dragon. How could one not be motivated to collect offerings when they saw what they could get? People always believed in themselves, and always had desires. Flowsand was no exception; if anything her desires were even stronger. The more capable and talented one was, the more they wanted to obtain things that were hard to reach.

A new imprint of an hourglass appeared on the cover of Book of Time after it absorbed the divine grace, while the Book of the Gods became one of its pages. The ribbons of light representing the power of the various deities of Faelor still populated the page.

Book 2, Chapter 205

Future

As the ceremony was coming to an end, the three pale spots of light entered Kars, Marvin and Richard. Kars and Marvin had assisted with the ceremony, contributing their own divine power to allow for the communication with the Eternal Dragon. They received a small amount of grace in return, allowing them to grow by one level to get to level 9.

However, a mere bystander like Richard receiving a little of the grace left Flowsand unable to help but feel indignant. He even received a time-related blessing, even though it was to a lesser degree.

Divine blessing— Dewdrop of Life. His body would not age for an extra six months.

‘Six months! You can do a lot with just six months. If there were thirty dews...’ Flowsand thought angrily, converting things to divine grace once more. Of course, her expression was still tranquil, even solemn.

When Kellac left the room, he looked like a middle-aged man once more. His skin even shone with a pale gold lustre. The enormous divine grace had not been fully absorbed yet, so he would need a few more days to look like an ordinary person once more. He wrapped himself completely with a hooded robe, leaving just as quietly as he came.

Back at level 13, Kellac now qualified to be called a priest even in Norland. There were many mass buffs amongst grade 6 divine spells, so his presence greatly boosted the strength of Richard’s army. Of course, Richard had also accepted an enemy of a high priest of the Highland Wargod, perhaps even the whole church. Of course, as an invader was the natural enemy of all the gods of Faelor; there was no difference whether he offended them greatly

or just a little.

He left that very night, going to the Demon Hunting Spears to bring over all the troops directly under him, also looking to see if he could hire the rest as well. He had seventy elites and fifteen unbelievers under him, the latter of which would soon become followers of the Eternal Dragon. They did not have the problem of changing their faith, so unlike a fallen priest like Kellac they would become proper clerics.

Richard didn't care about the Dewdrop of Life at all. However, the knowledge that it was worth a thirtieth of a greater devil told him that this drop was not so easy to obtain. With his current power, any greater devil could defeat him with ease. Besides, he'd just stood by the side watching the ceremony and still obtained some grace; that fact just made Flowsand angrier.

Although this beautiful cleric was a titled member of the Church, this was still her first time taking charge of such an important ritual by herself. That meant it was also the first time she had seen so many options for divine gifts. The sheer number of treasures blinded her for a moment, turning her into a kind of shopaholic. Her list of wants was so long the end could not be seen, so every drop of divine grace was extremely important.

However, that small gift showed how much value the Eternal Dragon attached to Richard.

The process of absorbing the grace this time was much shorter, and Richard was also used to the surging power of time. However, numerous colourful ribbons of light flashed past him during the process.

Previously, he would have thought this was just a normal phenomenon when one was absorbing divine grace. However, now that he had read the Book of Time once he felt like it was familiar. Something seemed to be hidden in those rays of light, so he used all his energy and called upon both his blessings to maximise the

speed of his thought. He was trying to find a way to catch what was hidden behind that glow.

With the upgraded blessings of wisdom and truth, Richard's perception was already equal to that of a saint. He finally managed to see the scenes behind that veil of light, just that there were far too many flashing by at a time. Almost a thousand different images crossed his sight per second, not something ordinary men could catch. Richard's heart beat wildly as he tried his best, but still he only managed to catch a few scenes with difficulty. Even then it was all blurred out, so much so that he could barely distinguish silhouettes.

But when he organised the afterimages in his memory and saw these scenes clearly, Richard suddenly felt his entire body freeze!

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Flowsand still had a lot of work to wrap up the ceremony. By the time she was done with everything, it was already night. The exhausted cleric headed to Richard's room, only to see him stood still before the large map while deep in thought. His face was as dark as murky water.

She sat behind him without a word. The two had their own worries, each immersed in their own world. The room was quiet one could hear the beating of hearts, and time quietly slipped by in the stillness. By the time they somewhat broke out of their reveries, two hours had passed.

Richard seemed to have set his mind on something, pounding his fist heavily on the map.

Flowsand got up and stood behind him, looking at the map to see that the fist had crushed the marker of a slave camp. This camp belonged to Red Cossack and wasn't far from Bluewater, an important interchange point in the Cossack slave trade.

Flowsand frowned. The raid on Red Cossack's caravan could still

be passed off as revenge for their attempt on his life, but an ambush against their slave camp would strike them at their weakness. They would be forced to confront him head-on, leading to an inevitable all-out battle between the two parties.

A plan was developed atop blood and bodies. Flowsand was not a naive girl; she had a mind to completely eliminate Red Cossack as well, but the chief issue was time.

“Aren’t you being a little impatient?” she asked. It was not wise to make too many enemies at the same time.

Richard did not answer, clearly still conflicted. The surprise attack could buy them some time, but the benefits were not worth the risk. They were both blessed by the Eternal Dragon, time was forever on their side.

“Flowsand. I saw some blurry scenes when absorbing the divine grace. What do they mean?” Richard asked.

Flowsand was startled, growing serious as she asked, “Were they clear?”

Richard hesitated for a moment, “No, it was incredibly blurred. I could only see that something was happening, but couldn’t tell who was involved at all.”

“Oh,” Flowsand didn’t continue to press for details, instead explaining, “The divine grace of the Eternal Dragon is a condensation of the power of time. Thus, your mind and soul could enter the river of time when absorbing it, getting a premonition of possible events in the future...”

“A premonition of the future?!” Richard’s expression changed greatly.

Still looking down at the map, Flowsand did not notice his unusual expression. She just nodded, saying, “What you absorbed was the power of time, so there’s a chance to see the future. However, you need to be a saint at minimum to actually

distinguish what you see. You don't have that ability right now."

The room was very dimly lit. Flowsand herself had not broken through her own worry, so she was too absent-minded to notice how unusually pale Richard's face was.

She did not think he already had the ability to get a rudimentary glimpse of these scenes. Most of what he saw was blood-soaked campaigns through foreign planes. Even in the most desperate of situations, his will was indomitable. However, two specific ones left him feeling like he had fallen into the abyss.

One was of a pitch-black void. Sharon was floating in the empty space, devoid of all signs of life.

The other was five years later, where Mountainsea waved goodbye to him and walked forward without looking back. In front of her was a sea of enemies, like a sea of oppressive black.

Looking at the map once more, Richard's gaze grew so cold it could burn.

If... If this was an inevitability, that only meant he needed to take a more active role!

Book 2, Chapter 206

Future(2)

The vision of the future was like a massive mountain crushing Richard's heart, leaving him unable to even smile. The joy from a powerhouse like Kellac joining his side was completely washed away by this looming fate. For some reason, he couldn't disregard these visions even if they were only a slight possibility.

He had achieved greatness at a young age. Few throughout Norland could better him at his age. Landing alone in a powerful secondary plane, cut off from reinforcements, he had quickly gotten himself together and become a qualified leader. However, throughout his life, even including when he had learnt about the nightmare creatures, this was the most despair he had ever felt.

He was left wondering what kind of fate was recorded in the scenes he could not capture. The feeling of knowing the future but only being able to see small bits of it was truly terrible.

A dim light shone over the large table with the map, the glow only going an inch beyond its bounds. The moonlight from the window was the only main source of light, so the room was shrouded in shades of black and grey.

Richard was sitting quietly, his back drawing random lines on the wall behind him. His heart now thirsted for strength more than ever. No matter how he thought about it, the best method to prevent that future was to offer sacrifices to the Eternal Dragon in exchange for great power. He would use the broodmother as a great tool of war, having her twist the outcome of his battles. Magic crystals, divine items, and food were a constant investment into her strength. In other words, the broodmother's power came from gold.

And be it items to sacrifice or gold to buy with, war was the quickest way to obtain either.

With his mind made up, the rest of the matters would be dealt with. Richard looked up and spoke to Flowsand, “Can you tell me about the gifts of the Eternal Dragon? It’s best if you tell me every variety you know.”

Flowsand snapped back from her own world of thought, nodding in reply, “The Dragon of Eternity and Light has countless gifts on offer. Everyone can be granted different things, his will changes based on the situation of the offerer. However, there are a few large categories— time, divine weapons, abilities, and domains among others. He adjusts the range of gifts based on the offerer’s greatest needs, and picks one at random from that range. This is merely the law of luck in play: luck is a part of one’s power, after all. A lucky fellow could get what he wants each time, while an unlucky one would have to aim for what they want through multiple ceremonies and sacrifices.

“Now, I can only tell you the gifts I know of. Time-related ones are the rarest of the lot; every living being instinctively wishes for immortality.”

The Eternal Dragon had innumerable gifts to give. Flowsand alone could list hundreds, and as she summarised each one the carriage of time unknowingly made its way till midnight.

Richard analysed how best he could combine these gifts as he listened, using them to develop most effectively. By this point, he didn’t care for what needed to be sacrificed anymore.

Just like Flowsand had said, luck was a sovereign law that surpassed planes. The Eternal Dragon had harsh requirements for offerings, and one required luck to gather objects to sacrifice.

Once Flowsand was done with the last type of gift, he brushed her hair and chuckled, “Enough, go to bed! It’s already very late. We have to make sure we’re alert; we will be fighting again tomorrow!”

Flowsand pursed her lips and hummed, “What a fake smile! If

you don't feel like smiling then don't!"

However, she did not ask Richard why he was so down all of a sudden. If he was going to keep quiet, then that would be the end of it. The two stripped out of their clothes and got into bed, but did nothing more than cuddle.

Richard gazed at the ceiling quietly, devoid of all thought. Flowsand lay in his embrace as she listened to his heartbeat, her mind a bitter blank as well. That sleepless night, the pair of young man and woman seemed to have matured slightly.

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When the first light of morning shone through the window, Flowsand leapt up and pinched Richard, "Hey, you lazy bum! Get out of bed, we're still fighting a war today. Tell me, who are we robbing?"

Richard awoke without hurry in front of the girl who was glimmering with enthusiasm, wearing his clothes before he suddenly grabbed her. He stared into her eyes and planted a light kiss on her lips, pinching her face hard, "Your smile's pretty fake too..."

Putting on her robes, Flowsand immediately left for her own room to get her equipment, checking her scrolls and making preparations for battle. In the meanwhile, Richard stood in front of the morning sun for a long time as he watched the chaotic yet exuberant Bluewater Oasis. He was deep in thought, with no hurry to gather his army and set off.

War was a double-edged sword. It could destroy one's enemies, but it would also harm oneself. The volcano in his heart was already on the verge of erupting, but he was in no hurry to act. Instead, after just standing there for an hour or so, he simply returned to his room and pondered in the silence.

If those truly were visions of the future, it was even more

important that he stay prudent and calm now. The long river of fate was an indomitable existence, meandering through the myriad planes. Regardless of why he had seen that specific image, it was only a possibility of the future that was not fixed. The river was not a single current, instead a mix of countless small flows that covered the past, present, and future.

Given his current strength, he could not compare to a drop of water within that huge river. In other words, a lack of caution could leave him dead before those scenes ever played out. When that moment in fate arrived, he would have lost the right to participate.

Even though everything around him looked peaceful, Richard knew it was actually quite dangerous. Although his army had accomplished many miracles, they were only performed while dancing on a razor's edge. Outdoing those stronger than him was only a last resort, and there was a limit to how much he could do himself. The moment he met a saint, he would face extreme danger. Even if he could overwhelm his enemy with numbers, it would require a devastating price. A single wrong step would completely end this army with limitless prospects.

Whether he could change the future or not, he wanted to be there. If he were to just die before even accomplishing that, everything else would just be empty talk.

First, he had to return to Norland. Only a fool would be innocent enough to want to use this army to take over all of Faelor. The road back was already halfway paved; Flowsand had obtained the Eternal Passage blessing, all that was left was the Core of Time. The key now was enough of a sacrifice to acquire it. However, that did not need to come through war alone. There were still many other methods, like trade, cheating, or persuasion.

And he had enough items on hand for trades.

Book 2, Chapter 207

Collaboration

It took the entire morning before Richard managed to walk out of his room. Gathering a few desert warriors, he brought Olar and Phaser along and left Bluewater Oasis, hastening towards the Red Cossack camp.

10 kilometres away from the slave camp, he came to a stop. The information he'd gotten from his friends told him this was the furthest the camp's sentinels would patrol. He waited patiently until night fell, sending out the enhanced elite bats. They circled the sky above the slave camp, using their night vision to give him a clear understanding of the camp's defensive layout.

This was an enormous camp, with nearly 8,000 imprisoned slaves. There was an army of 500 watching over them, with a stable not far away. Interactions between two guards as well as the routes of the patrols gave him an estimate of about three hundred cavalrymen guarding the outer perimeter. His robbing that second-class caravan had caused them to strengthen their defences for a while.

Having figured out the situation, Richard silently left and returned to Bluewater. When he knocked on Amon's door, it was already late into the night. The old man was still at the grocery store, running his ordinary little shop. Foreigners would not be able to tell that this wizened old man was someone who could influence the entire oasis.

Seeing that it was Richard at the door, Amon was slightly surprised. However, he didn't say anything as he allowed the mage to enter. A few moments later, he brought over a pot of tea and a plate of refreshments, pouring two cups and sitting calmly in front of Richard as he waited for a reason for the visit.

For his part, Richard did not hesitate, "I'll be obtaining a batch of

slaves soon, and I need my hands off them as soon as possible.”

“How many, and which race?” Amon asked without a change in expression.

“A little more than 8,000. Nearly 4,000 each of desert people and dwarves, with a few hundred wild elves, dark elves, and barbarians. The elves and barbarians aren’t males.”

Amon gazed at Richard with profound meaning in his eyes, “You are too anxious.”

“It’s a lack of confidence,” Richard answered calmly, “If we can work together, I’ll be 80% confident. We can’t just act when we’re merely 10% confident, can we?”

“80%? You really are quite self-confident,” Amon chuckled, “But it’s a good thing for young people to be confident. I’ll take it as... 60%. Do you need Lord Rolf’s support?”

“Yes,” Richard nodded, “Red Cossack has two saints. While they’re not from the Bloodstained Lands, it’s hard enough for me to deal with one right now.”

Amon took a small sip of black tea and said gently, “Contending against saints is no small matter. Have you prepared enough?”

“We can split Red Cossack halfway. It should be worth the cost.”

“Indeed, that’s not small,” Amon muttered to himself. But then, he slowly continued, “The worth of battles between saints cannot be measured in gold. Victory is often more important, so Lord Rolf might be very careful in considering this.”

Richard immediately understood what Amon was getting at. The two saints in charge of Red Cossack were the same as Rolf, level 16. It was hard to say who would win even in a one-on-one matchup. Amon was implying that he wasn’t confident in Rolf’s chances against them. If the Sword Saint lost, then Richard would have even fewer chances of victory against them. Rolf likely wouldn’t want to step into these murky waters, regardless of how much

Richard had on offer.

However, Richard only wanted Rolf to stall the Red Cossack saints. He had quite a few spellcasters on his side, making it a powerful army based on Faelor's standards. The clerics' buffs on Rolf would make him so powerful the enemy would be ashamed. On the other hand, all sorts of curses would assault the enemies, forcing them to use more energy. On top of all this, the Sword Saint had bought a rune from him before; unless the opponents were two levels higher, they were bound to lose. Flowsand's Lens of Time, in particular, could grant a definite kill if she was successful.

But he obviously couldn't go about revealing his trump cards; he had far too many secrets that nobody knew of. He would never show all of his cards when making a deal. Thankfully, there were other methods. He lifted the teacup and drank a mouthful, "Mr. Kellac already has a new religion. He has decided to forge ahead by my side, and I will help him fulfill the wishes he has held for so many years."

Amon startled. This information was out of his expectations and reminded him that backing Richard was a new demigod.

No, the fact that Kellac had already converted implied that this existence was only a step away from igniting their godfire, becoming a true deity. Right now, he was likely condensing a divine domain. With a backer like that, it was no wonder that Richard had the guts to attack the violent Red Cossack.

Kellac had been a good friend of Amon's for many years. That was exactly why Richard had used him right at the start. "It's great that he found a new faith," the old man muttered to himself, "but he doesn't have many years left. He probably cannot be of much help to you."

Richard smiled lightly, "He's actually doing quite well now. It won't be an issue for him to live another two decades."

“What?!” Amon was shocked, “That’s impossible! I know his situation well. Even if he has the divine power of a new god poured into him, it will only extend his life by two or three years!”

“He will return in a few days. You’ll know his situation when you see him.” Richard put the cup down, tossing out his second card without any hurry, “If Lord Rolf is willing to pay a certain price, and he trusts me enough, I can help him overcome his enemies.”

Crash! The teacup in Amon’s hands fell to the ground, shattering into bits. The old man still hadn’t recovered from the surprise about Kellac’s lifespan, and this shock had left him without control of himself.

His experience told him that the entity backing Richard had to be something incredible. The boy’s words surprised him so greatly that he did not even have the time to bother with the shattered cup or his damp robes. His voice shook slightly as he asked, “Do you mean... Your ‘rune’ can help Lord Rolf jump levels?”

Book 2, Chapter 208

Collaboration(2)

“It should be possible. My mentor just made a breakthrough and finished a new piece that is unmatched. However, both creation and activation use up large amounts of magic crystals. The rune can only be used twice as well,” Richard said calmly.

Amon tried to suppress the excitement he was feeling, but he could not contain his emotions as he exclaimed repeatedly, “Unimaginable, unimaginable!”

Only equipment close to the calibre of a divine weapon could possibly raise the power of a saint by an entire level. If it could be used twice, this new rune by Richard’s mentor could be called a quasi-divine weapon. In a crucial moment, it granted the wearer two additional lives.

Having learnt of this, Amon couldn’t care less about Richard’s lengthy explanation that had a string of technical terms. Nor did he pay attention about the materials needed to activate it; no number of magic crystals was too much for a prospective divine weapon.

There could be a drastic difference in the power of two saints, even if they were both level 16. Various factors like equipment, skill, energy type, experience, and talent came into play, all affecting the outcome of a battle in some way or the other. Although the two saints of Red Cossack were only level 16, they had been born commoners who only advanced to their level through the endless flames of massacre. They were now known as battle maniacs who were no different from normal level 17 fighter. Rolf had lost more often than he won against them.

However, his chances of victory would be boosted to about 70-80% if his power could be boosted by an entire level. That would be enough. He could go all out as long as he was 70% sure of the

outcome; someone able to become a saint would not lack even that amount of courage.

To Rolf, this wasn't just a matter of defeating two opponents. It was the experience of wielding the power of someone a level higher than him, something that would be greatly beneficial to his own advancement in the future. Every level once one became a saint was extremely difficult to cross.

Amon immediately made up his mind, "Alright! If your rune really is that effective, I can promise you right away that Lord Rolf will become a resolute ally in your fight against Red Cossack!"

The interests involved in this matter were so major that it was no longer necessary to inform Rolf beforehand. Amon knew the saint swordsman extremely well, and that he would have no room for hesitation at all. He did not suspect the capabilities of Richard's mentor either; he had always been paying attention to any news related to the youth, and although there were a lot of secrets the knowledge of the existence of runes was extremely handy. He managed to find out about Richard selling an entire batch to the Direwolf Duke through his channels, and if these things were beginning to show up en masse then the crafting style and quality had to be stabilising. Naturally, that meant more formidable products would follow.

Richard passed a list to Amon, "In that case, this is the list of materials needed to equip and activate the rune. Also, forgive me but some extra materials were added to keep things confidential. They're roughly worth the cost of the basic components of the rune that I already have."

The old man had no objection to this. Any mage would ask for more materials than they needed when manufacturing for someone else; that way, they could prevent others from figuring out how their artifacts were made.

"I hope to receive them in a week's time. It will take about ten

days or so to process, and Lord Rolf should need a few more days after that to get used to it. Time is tight.”

Looking through the numerous items on the list, Amon couldn't help but inhale sharply, “The things on this list are worth 200,000 coins at minimum!”

“200,000 coins for two chances to defeat formidable opponents; it isn't expensive at all. Gold can be earned again, but the opportunity to obtain great power does not come frequently.”

The old man nodded gravely. Richard was right; it was impossible to buy a chance to defeat a saint with even 2 million coins, forget 200,000. He scrutinised the list once more, “Time is rather tight, but I will make sure these materials are in your hands in five days. However, can the crafting time be reduced? The Red Cossack saints could be here any time.”

Richard shook his head, “I'll be the one crafting the rune; ten days is already the lowest it can go. You should know my mentor took an entire two months to finish the basic components. Besides, even for it to be done in ten days there can be no flaw in the quality of the materials you give me. The higher the quality, the faster I finish.”

“In this case...” The old man creased his brows, hesitating a moment before speaking up, “I suggest you speak with Devon as well. The conflict between the Golden Warflag and Red Cossack is only growing, and that old fatty is always interested in anything that hurts them. However, it won't be easy to convince him. If the Golden Warflag is willing to stand by our side, things will be a lot easier to handle. They have two saints themselves, and Lord Falcao will be able to rush over very quickly.”

Richard thought it over for a moment before replying, “Alright, I'll go talk to him. I believe he will join our side.”

Only half an hour later, Richard met the large man in his dazzlingly furnished hall. Devon had fallen asleep a short while

ago, and he did not seem too pleased with Richard interrupting his dreams. The only reason he had even gotten out of his warm and cozy bed was Richard's dual identity as a runemaster's disciple and a great mage.

He shifted himself onto the spacious sofa, letting out a huge yawn before he spoke, "Dear Richard, you must have some good news to make up for the precious sleep I lost."

"Me, you, and Amon— what say we divide Red Cossack up?"

Richard's voice wasn't loud, but it caused Devon's eyes to widen in an instant. The man's enormous figure leapt up from the sofa immediately, and he pointed at Richard and began a little incoherently. "You... Y-you crazy! This is impossible!"

If it was someone else speaking such words, Devon would have thrown them out long ago. However, Richard was an extremely young great mage. Anything a great mage said ought to be taken seriously; they were people who combined talent, power, and wisdom in a single package. Their judgement was rarely wrong.

"You don't have to pay a huge price. Just call Lord Falcao over to Bluewater to keep watch for a few days, and back me up with some soldiers or battle slaves."

"Explain. In Detail." Devon was already devoid of all sleepiness, gazing at Richard with bright eyes.

Book 2, Chapter 209

Desires

Devon had already agreed to join hands with Amon, seeking more power in Bluewater's new order together, but that was nowhere nearly as crazy as Richard's plan. The mage wanted to kick Red Cossack out, a group that held a fourth of the influence in the Oasis on the whole!

When Richard explained the details, Devon immediately pointed out two problems, "Even if Lord Falcao was here, both he and Rolf would not be a match for the two saints of Red Cossack. But let's ignore that for a moment, say we can hold up the opponent's saints, can you sweep away all of Red Cossack's forces? These men are known throughout the Bloodstained Lands for their ruthlessness and ferocity!"

Richard smiled calmly, "I have a solution to the first problem, at some cost of course. As for the second... Yes. Yes, I can."

The fellow's eyes sparkled. "Interesting!" he said as he rubbed his hands together, "Interesting!"

And thus, the deal with Devon was sealed. The fatty had his own logic to things: if Richard could convince Amon of the feasibility of this operation, then he would trust the boy as well. The mage already had great military successes that inspired confidence, and the Golden Warflag was not afraid of Red Cossack anyway. Falcao definitely wasn't as good as the opponent's saints, but Lord Trey, who was handling affairs elsewhere, could destroy one of them without issue.

The contract was thus finalised, but it still required some steps on Richard's part to bring it into effect. The mage needed to bring back thousands of slaves as proof of his power.

Neither Amon nor Devon considered Richard's current army to

be worth even a mention. Although they didn't want to force the cards from this friend's hand, he still needed to prove his ability on the field if he wanted to ally with them.

When the sun rose the next morning, Richard and his entire army took off for the slave camp. The sun was setting when he returned to Bluewater, an enormous group trailing behind him. Although there were less than 8,000 slaves, the number wasn't too far off. The group looked magnificent from a distance, the 1000-strong army at the helm looking extremely weak in comparison.

The 8,000 slaves all entered Bluewater, alarming almost everyone within. Many were still unaware of the origin of these slaves, but any fool could understand the benefits they represented.

Most people were envious, some even thinking of snatching the batch of slaves away. However, the appearance of both Devon and Amon in a welcoming position caused the restless crowd to calm down.

Only a small number of people could see what was really going on. The composition of Richard's army spoke roughly of their marching speed. Given how long it would take to travel to and from the battlefield, and adding in the time it would have taken to reorganise the slaves, one would come up with an astonishing duration for the battle.

Richard's friends were stood side by side, unable to help but glance at each other to notice the shock in their eyes. They understood the strength of that Red Cossack camp well, and that the number of cavalrymen guarding it had increased recently. Even if the battle was extremely short, they had expected Richard to be at least two hours slower. After all, he still needed to let his soldiers eat and rest before the attack.

The fact that Richard returned this early proved how little time they took for both rest and the attack itself. It gave them a brand

new understanding of his army, especially since he had returned with almost the same numbers that had gone out.

Since when was Red Cossack so weak that they collapsed with a single blow?

The question emerged within the minds of the two at the same time. However, these sly old foxes realised that such a thought would be mistaken. Red Cossack's might only grew and grew, never waning. This was an accomplishment of Richard's army alone.

Did he have some other troops he did not expose earlier? That couldn't be. Supplying, garrisoning, and dispatching an army was a big affair that was impossible to hide perfectly. Moreover, how could their information networks miss an army hiding out near their own headquarters?

Even if Richard held the numbers advantage, the slave camp was on defensible terrain. With 500 strong defenders and a troop of a few hundred horse bandits on top, it wasn't easy to wipe them out in a single attack. Both of them knew one thing in their hearts: the high-ranking generals they knew might not be able to get the job done with even two or three thousand people, nevermind the 1,000 men Richard had taken with him.

Looking at Amon and Devon from afar, Richard stopped his horse and waved to them from a distance. After that, he pointed behind himself with a smile on his face.

Devon patted his head repeatedly, turning to his subordinates and roaring, "Why aren't you lot preparing?! Those are our slaves! Camps, guards, food, and doctors, is everything ready? Did I not make myself clear to you this morning, why are you all still standing here like idiots?!"

Since when had this fatty told them anything? Forget 8,000 slaves, he hadn't even brought up 80! A few of his subordinates had doubts in their hearts, but how could someone stupid be able

to rise so high in the Golden Warflag? Every one of them just repeatedly said 'yes' with a terrified face, rushing off to handle their tasks.

Richard returned to the inn alongside his party; naturally, there were some subordinates who could take care of the complicated matter of handing over the slaves. He believed this display would leave enough of an impression on the Golden Warflag and Marquess Anrick.

Red Cossack didn't just rely on their saints and ferocity to rule the roost. Their guards were widely known for great strength, their army comparable to that of a Marquess.

Powerhouses and elite soldiers were two sides of the coin of war, both were indispensable. One or two saints could not match up to an entire army; it would be like pitting a lion against a pack of wolves. However, an army without a powerhouse would falter under the attack of saints. The slightest gap in their defences would allow the saints to decimate them with guerilla tactics.

Richard didn't want to put on a display of personal power, or of the power of his runes. He was showing off his ability at the helm of an army. He was the only one who could destroy Red Cossack's defences without much of a military advantage. That way, both Anrick and the Golden Warflag would go all out to support him. The army would not be an issue; either of them could give him enough soldiers and equipment.

Richard had become the centre of focus in the entire oasis. Hundreds of gazes were fixed upon him, a mix of envy and curiosity that did not lack hatred. Although nobody discussed it publicly, the rumours spread very quickly and soon everyone knew where those slaves had come from. The Red Cossack camp was the only place nearby with so many slaves, and the fact that they were his enemies was already a public secret.

Riding his tall horse, Richard could overlook the majority of the

people in the city. He had already become someone with a modicum of infamy. Workers were already beginning large-scale construction in his lands and refurbishing the existing buildings, with everything that used to belong to Schitich now falling under his name. His territory in the Bloodstained Lands was now large enough to build a large camp that could house 3,000 slaves.

The new camp would be completed by the time Red Cossack was eliminated from Bluewater, just in time to consolidate his new status as one of its key influences.

However, none of this was what he desired. All the power, all the reverence, the surging wealth, the ability to kill as he pleased... nothing mattered. He couldn't bring himself to be happy with these achievements.

Book 2, Chapter 210

Desires(2)

That dark premonition was like a piece of lead in Richard's heart, urging him on to grow as powerful as he could as quickly as possible. He had to return to Norland.

The power at his hand was indeed growing rapidly, but the further he walked this path the more distinctly he understood how strong Sharon and Mountainsea truly were. He had known before that Sharon was powerful, but had not possessed the ability to gauge the extent of her ability. It was like a mortal gazing up at the starry sky, knowing it was vast but not how much.

He now felt like he had a slight idea, but that only made it clear to him that they were leagues apart with a vast ocean between them. As for Mountainsea, she walked a completely different path to power that he still couldn't see through.

Back at the inn, the first thing he did was to enter the basement. The place had been turned into a temporary interrogation hall, the large room in the centre connected to a dozen small cells. Numerous instruments of torture were placed in the middle, most of which had been borrowed from the Golden Warflag.

Most of the prisoners here were dwarves, with some leaders of the second-class Red Cossack caravan added on. A few sinister half-naked torturers were currently dragging a dwarf who was at his last breath off the rack.

Standing at the side, Caesar quickly flipped through the holy tome in his hands. A gentle voice trembled out the chant for a healing spell, a ray of holy light pulling the near-dead dwarf back from death's door. The youth looked pale, evidently finding it difficult to handle the bloody scene. However, that difficulty did nothing to affect his spells.

A shadow of the late Baron now lay across his face. His gift for the divine was apparent: it hadn't taken him long to get to level 3 where he could start casting healing spells. He would qualify to be a full cleric in any church on Faelor now.

Olar was in charge of the entire procedure. His handsome, feminine features had been warped by fury, eyes shooting out a cold, cruel radiance.

“Hang him up and sober him with a few buckets of freezing water! Let's see if he can remember the route back to the Anvil of Lightning then!” the elf shouted in exasperation.

Two torturers hung the dwarf up, pouring the water right on his face. The unconscious fellow yelled as he regained consciousness, all the wounds on his body throbbing with pain. He couldn't help but groan, but every grunt was laced with curses. The many rounds of torture had not broken him.

There was practically no bit of skin on the dwarf's body that was still in good condition. Caesar was constantly casting lesser heals to preserve his life, but the cleric did not yet have the ability to fix the wounds. That was something only someone at Flowsand's level could accomplish.

Richard's eyes swept through the room the moment he entered, and his face immediately distorted into a frown. “What?” he asked Olar, “They're still not willing to talk?”

“These guys are like... No, they're the same as the dwarves back home,” Olar smiled bitterly.

Already cruel and merciless, the bard had learnt a great many torture methods from Richard. On top of that, he had the help of a cleric. And yet, after an entire day and night, he still couldn't force these dwarves to give up the most important piece of information — the location of their tribe.

One had to note that the presence of a cleric greatly enhanced the

cruelty of torture. Of course, the extent of that depended on the level of the cleric— even if one slipped up, a high priest could bring someone back from the brink of death.

Richard's brows wrinkled even more, "They're still insisting on what they said?"

"Yes, Master." Olar smiled bitterly, wiping away the sweat on his forehead, "They've signed a contract with Red Cossack, witnessed by their god. They will support Red Cossack for thirty years, refusing to go against their oath. These dwarves are very stubborn, we need time to wear them down."

Richard looked over the prisoners, asking, "Did you tell them clearly what that means?"

His tone was extremely cold, to the point that even Olar couldn't help but tremble. "I've already warned them that allying with Red Cossack will make them our enemy, and that we're never lenient to our foes. They know cooperating is their only chance of survival, but—"

"The dwarves of the Anvil will never betray an oath to our god!" a coarse roar sounded out, interrupting the elf's words. It was a rough gunman, his moustache so coarse it looked like a horse's mane.

Richard headed to the dwarf's cage and crouched down, speaking calmly, "I don't need you to betray your god. Just give me the formula for your gunpowder, and I'll let you go. If you still want to support Red Cossack after that, do as you wish. However, let me remind you— Red Cossack is a target I must exterminate. I won't hold back if I see your kind at their side."

"You want the formula for the Thunder God's Fire? Dream on!" the gunman guffawed, spitting at Richard.

Richard's expression grew cold. Air surged as his magic barrier stirred, sending the saliva flying back to paste itself on the dwarf's

face. He did not have the patience to waste time on the dwarf, instead walking up to the caravan captains, “What about you? Are any of you going to tell me what I want to know?”

Most of them were silent, only one middle-aged man spitting in contempt as he said fiercely, “You dare steal Red Cossack’s goods and kill our people... Wait for your death! Once our army arrives, you should pray you die in battle. If you don’t, burly men of all races will be waiting for your ass! Your women won’t do any better... They’ll be taken by at least fifty every day—”

Richard stood up, a silencing spell cutting off the man’s words. “Why is it that everyone we meet is smelly and stubborn?” he frowned, “Isn’t there anyone in Red Cossack afraid of death?”

His voice was calm, but Olar shivered once more. He had no idea how to answer, but he could not remain quiet either. The atmosphere was stifling in the silence.

“Master... We might just have had bad luck this time,” he said carefully.

Book 2, Chapter 211

Desires(3)

The dwarves had actually played along in the beginning, talking about their battles with Red Cossack. However, when it came to matters of principle like their gunpowder recipes or the location of their tribe, they turned into rocks that would not open their mouths. Olar tried every method he knew over the entire day, but there was no progress. This was something he had never encountered before; even Norland's dwarves weren't this unyielding. Any decently sized group, regardless of race, was bound to have some people who were timid and greedy. However, every prisoner they had taken from the caravan was extremely stubborn. It could only be chalked up to bad luck.

"I don't have the time!" Richard coldly interrupted, pointing at the middle-aged Red Cossack captain, "Drag him out!"

A few men opened the door of the cage, pulling the man out and placing him in front of Richard. The mage did not speak a word, merely closing his eyes as his breathing grew more ragged and his face ashen. It only lasted a short while, though— his breaths were back to normal by the time he opened his eyes again. However, in the depths of those pupils was something nobody here could see clearly.

Richard's gaze bored into the middle-aged man's eyes, "I've run out of patience. Tell me right now, where is the Anvil of Lightning?"

The middle-aged man groaned, not answering the question. However, Richard did not frown this time, only taking the sword from Olar's waist.

Schlick! The blade cut off the man's right hand. Blood spurted out like a fountain, turning the fellow's face white. He let out a stifled groan, but still remained unyielding as he tried to stay

upright without shouting.

Richard looked him in the eyes, saying solemnly, “I do not have any more time. The more you delay me, the lower the chances that these other two survive. And they’re very important to me!”

“Then let them die!” came the response.

Schlick! The left arm fell to the floor.

“Where is the Anvil of Lightning?” Richard asked twice more, the lack of response robbing the man of both his legs.

“Caesar!” Richard called. The youth could not keep his hands from trembling, but still managed to complete a lesser healing spell. This would only slow down the bleeding, causing the man to die a slower death. A simple healing spell could not fix such deep wounds.

Richard passed the sword back to Olar. The bard noticed that the fingers gripping the blade had turned pale, an indication that the mage had overexerted his energy. The mage wasn’t actually feeling as calm as he looked; his heart was boiling with a volcanic rage that could erupt at any time.

Richard took out a handkerchief, wiping his hands that were stained with blood as he spoke to Olar, “You can go and rest now. Come back tomorrow morning. If they are still unwilling to yield, cut all their limbs off in the evening and throw them outside the city!”

“Yes, Master!” Olar replied with his head lowered. For some reason, even though some past orders had been crueller, this one felt especially bone-chilling. It was as if his master had completely transformed into someone else over the past few days.

Only after Richard left the interrogation room could the bard manage to relax. He let out a deep breath, thick beads of sweat pouring down his face to drench his entire outfit. Feeling uncomfortable, the elf cast an angry gaze at the captives and

hurled expletives their way, having the guards keep a close eye on them as he left the interrogation room.

That night he felt especially depressed, as though something was stuck in his chest. He needed to find a place to have a drink and relax.

.....

When he returned to his room, Richard closed the door and forced himself to calm down as he tried to start meditating. The Archeron blood in the depths of his body was roaring without end, giving him a strong urge to rip apart everything in his way!

He sat down and tried to quiet the restless blood, his consciousness slowly becoming still.

His inner mind was initially black everywhere, but a starry blue light slowly lit up in a corner. A spectre of himself revolved around that blue sea, a translucent silhouette of his own body that was covered in faint mist.

The dull lights were a representation of his current magical abilities. Given his blessing of wisdom, it did not take any time to accurately calculate the depth of his mana pool. As a level 11 mage, he currently had a total of 800 points of mana. He wasn't far from level 12.

The colour of the magic lights represented the distribution of the different elements. His own mana pool was a mix of different colours, a balanced chaos with no specific affinity. This was the most common type of mana.

Numerous dark-red lines roamed all over his body, each as slender as a spiderweb. If he concentrated on them and magnified the image, he could see that these traces resembled blood vessels. However, the blood flowing within them was close to boiling temperature.

This was not the first time he had come across this scene during

meditation. He knew that they were not his real veins, merely a vestige of his Archeron bloodline's strength.

The Archeron bloodline was unbelievably powerful. Even a mere grade 2 ability like Blaze was extremely strong. It could speed up his spellcasting by over 20%, only limited by the fact that his immature bloodline would not allow him to use Eruption at the same time. Using Blaze was equivalent to forfeiting his own survival skills.

In the deepest part of his body was a large, fuzzy tree, with lush branches that spread out everywhere. They reached the extremes of his body, intertwining with that crimson web. One could not trace the branches back to the root, nor could they find the end.

A vast array of roots encircled five trunks, with most of the branches and leaves growing out of one. This tree was a manifestation of his elven blood, the five trunks representing the affinities granted by his bloodline: nature, the elements, recovery, illusion, and moonforce. The most developed of the lot was the trunk of nature, the origin of the boost to his Nature's Beckon spell. The moonforce trunk had grown a little as well, but the other three were mostly stems without much growth.

A cloud of mana pervaded the tree and the spiderwebs, constantly pumping into both bloodlines and spilling out once more. However, the mana was being worn down a little in this process; the effect was so minute that Richard only sensed it because of his sharpness and care.

Book 2, Chapter 212

To Return Home

Bloodline abilities had been studied extensively in Norland. They did not pop out of thin air, instead drawing power based on the wielder's class. For a warrior that was energy and for mage mana, but there were other options like astral power, fire, and moonforce. This absorbed power was then mutated into the ability, be it powerful or useless. That was why only a lucky few had the gift to be born with them. Most people unlocked abilities as they grew in level.

Those like Richard, possessing multiple bloodlines that could grant abilities, were often met with the quandary of choice. The more they used one of their bloodlines, the more it would develop. With time, it would grow to dominate the rest.

Richard allowed his mind to still once more, his soul force gradually spreading out. The mana within his body started to radiate outside, seemingly sensing something.

With the mana rippling out from his silent sea of consciousness, it revealed the occasional ray of blue astral light nearby. These rays were trapped by the mana, pulled into his body to slightly strengthen him. This light immediately dissolved once it entered his body, but it turned a small portion of his mana blue.

This was the beginning portion of Sharon's unique meditation technique, the Deepblue Fantasy. This method allowed one to sense rays of astral light that held unknown properties, not using elemental mana. This blue energy was somewhat similar to astral power, but it wasn't exactly the same. Outside of the ability to substitute for all other kinds of mana, Richard hadn't been able to find any of its unique strengths yet.

Richard had only begun to use the Deepblue Fantasy after he advanced to level 10. Every ray he caught was equivalent to a tenth

of a point of mana. He could normally capture anywhere from one to three rays for every hour of meditation, making the technique thrice as fast as any ordinary methods. These details were proof of how rich the Deepblue's inheritance was.

Meditation was not easy. Richard found it difficult to enter the depths of his mind, which was why he only managed to find a single astral ray within the hour. On top of that, his Archeron bloodline suddenly grew boisterous the moment it entered him, absorbing the power quickly!

This was the first time his bloodline was absorbing power of its own accord. All of a sudden it flashed an image in his mind, one that was extremely familiar to him: a fragment of the future scenes he had witnessed due to the divine grace. It was an image of Sharon, her body floating in the boundless void.

Richard abruptly opened his eyes, spitting out a mouthful of blood. The crimson liquid did not even make it to the floor, vapourising the moment it spurted out!

Bang! The door to his room was suddenly pushed open; Flowsand had darted in from next door, barely in time to see the wisp of bloody mist. She couldn't help but cry out, "What's wrong?"

Some shuffling sounds rang out, and Waterflower and Phaser charged in as well, in that order. They were both closely connected to Richard's soul, and immediately sensed him wavering. This distress was like a haze that stretched out to push them down, as if about to devour the entire world in a moment.

Richard swayed, suddenly feeling fatigued and weak. He couldn't help but lean into Flowsand's embrace, looking pale as he closed his eyes and said gently, "I'm... I'm fine. I... I just want to go home."

Seeing the blood still flowing from the corner of his mouth, Flowsand hugged him tightly, "We will! We'll go back very soon! What's wrong with you? Don't... don't scare me!"

She tried to wipe the blood off his face, but her ice-cold hands were shaking. She only managed to smear the bloodstains further.

The blood Richard had coughed out reeked with the aura of magic, feeling very similar to the greatest catastrophe a mage could ever be plagued by— mana disintegration. Flowsand's mind had blanked the moment she came through the door to see the evaporating mist. She was no longer the divine cleric who was calm as water, instead holding the young man tightly in her arms as she felt just as helpless as any other.

Although their souls were not connected, she could still sense the haze of despair appearing in the depths of his soul, practically covering the last light of his consciousness. It felt like the heavens themselves were collapsing, leaving her without the strength to reach out and resist.

Stood at the side, Waterflower just held the Shepherd of Eternal Rest tightly while at a loss. She only knew to kill, not to heal. While those delicate fingers of hers were pale with the exertion already, she knew that her blade could do nothing in this situation.

It was instead Phaser, standing silently in the corner so far, that said something stiffly. This was still divine tongue, but it was the same language used in Norland so Flowsand could understand. "Divine spell. Restoration."

Flowsand suddenly returned to herself, only then remembering that she was a cleric. She helped Richard up and quickly started a chant, preparing the healing spell. It would not fix the mana disintegration, but at least it would treat the wounds. However, even this spell that she could recite in her dreams she failed twice, only managing to cast it properly on the third attempt.

The rejuvenating power immediately seeped into every part of Richard's body, returning a rosy tint to his pale face. The violent movements of his Archeron bloodline finally abated, the berserking mana quieting down.

Richard closed his eyes, recovering for a moment before he opened them again, “I’m fine. There were just some small issues during the meditation. There’s no need to worry.”

Flowsand opened her mouth, but eventually decided not to continue the topic, “Alright... But don’t meditate anymore tonight. The spell needs time to work.”

Richard nodded, smiling as he always did, “Fine, no problem. You lot should get back to sleep now!” His elegant elven face had been sharpened and restrained by numerous trips to death’s door.

It was indeed late. Just like they had arrived, Waterflower and Phaser turned into two shadows that silently left the room. When Flowsand was at the door, she suddenly turned back and said earnestly, “We will return quickly.”

Richard maintained that striking smile as he shook his head, “There’s no rush. We shouldn’t hurry the matter, just keep working on our own schedule.”

“Mm!” the cleric nodded hard before returning to her room, giving him some space.

Richard lay down on the bed, but just couldn’t fall asleep. The restoration spell was showing its effects: the divine power had activated his body’s healing abilities, healing the injuries very quickly. By the time the divine force was completely exhausted, a biting fatigue ate into every sinew of his body that left him craving rest. However, the moment he closed his eyes those premonitions that shook him to the very core appeared in his sight once more. They were impossible to get rid of.

Since he couldn’t sleep, he got dressed and made his way out of bed, taking out his tools as he began to craft runes.

Book 2, Chapter 213

Troll's Battle

Richard found no problem with crafting an elementary strength rune, even with his mana depleted. The only adverse effect was that the boost would be slightly lower than normal.

The rune he was currently working on was meant for Medium Rare, and would raise the troll's might greatly. Runes weren't limited to humans: elves, dwarves, gnomes... any race with adequate intelligence could use them with only minor adjustments. Even some powerful magic beasts could use runes, an example being the mounts of rune knights.

However, few people in history had crafted runes for trolls and barbarians, even for elementary runes. Most runemasters in history had come from humans and elves, and with the elven empires split apart most current runemasters were human. Every single one was a person of high esteem, and regardless of the quality of their runes demand always outstripped supply. Who would create runes for barbarians and trolls, beings that humans believed were only a step above beasts?

Trolls could indeed equip runes. They were different from orcs in that regard, many even having talent for magic. Tiramisu himself was a prime example of this.

Although the rune Richard was crafting wasn't customised for trolls, given his strong vitality Medium Rare would only feel slightly uncomfortable when using it. However, his strength would still be boosted to a great extent. Costs would skyrocket if he wanted to make the custom rune, and it would take three months to craft. On top of that, outside of the comfort when using it, the bonus to the strength boost would be a measly 5%.

The elementary strength rune was nearly complete by dawn. It would only take two more days to finish.

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A calm day passed in Bluewater. People had many things to discuss, mostly with regards to Richard returning with nearly 8,000 slaves. Although he had kept all the sturdy barbarians and wild elves to himself, the remaining desert warriors were still worth 50,000 gold. And this was only the price in the Bloodstained Lands! 50,000 gold was no small amount to anyone, so everyone was naturally happy to chat about it throughout the day.

However, once night fell the people had one more thing to discuss. That was the sudden appearance of a dozen people at the boundaries of the city.

It was a mixed group of humans and dwarves. The attention-grabbing detail was that all of them had their limbs amputated, but were still healed by divine spells. The stumps were not bleeding profusely, and at the very least they would not die in the next few days. They tossed about, their wails of anguish so agonising that even the hardened residents of the Bloodstained Lands were appalled. Some had recognised that the humans hailed from Red Cossack, but nobody dared relieve them of their pain. They did not even have the courage to end their suffering.

People had already noticed that Richard's subordinates were the ones who had dumped these fellows here. Now, this handsome young mage was no different from a demon in their eyes.

The same night Richard had plundered the second-class caravan and reached Bluewater with its goods, the Red Cossack agents in the city had silently left to avoid his blade. However, nobody would believe that the ferocious merchant group had conceded to the great mage. The local agent just felt like he did not have the strength to engage Richard in combat, so he retreated for now. Red Cossack had started out as a bandit group, and they were scattered across the vast land. They rarely placed massive military forces in a single city. Their response to this provocation would definitely be fierce.

The conflict between Richard and Red Cossack had reached the point of no return. Given how he had dealt with the entire situation, it was obvious that he had no more mercy than them. Blood did not scare these people, but it definitely stopped anyone who harboured ill intent for him because of his age.

The onlookers naturally had their own opinions of the situation, but they consciously lowered their voice. This was a display of Richard's power.

Night fell once more. Richard was finishing up on his strength rune, while Flowsand was in the middle of her nightly classes for her apprentices where she taught them how to amass divine power and use it.

Waterflower was still hidden in the darkness; nobody outside of Richard could pinpoint her location. Phaser occasionally hovered nearby, but sometimes she just wandered around in the city. Gangdor and Tiramisu stayed with the army; with a hundred new barbarians and sixty elven archers, training had to be stepped up so they could integrate into the forces as soon as possible. The others had their own matters to attend to; Richard would be staying in Bluewater for some more time.

News had already arrived from Kellac's side. He had finished absorbing all the divine power, and he was bringing his own army over. 300 warriors of the Demon Hunting Spears had accepted Richard's recruitment and would hasten over once their current missions came to an end. While they would take a collective 3,000 coins per month, elites that were level 7 at minimum with two powerful level 13 swordsmen meant he was getting his money's worth.

All that was left was to wait for the saint of the Golden Warflag, Falcao. When he arrived, there would be no need to fear any sudden attack by Red Cossack.

The rune meant for Rolf was already in production. It cost a great

deal to make and would last half an hour per activation. Whenever active, it would enhance the user's strength by 20% and defence by 10%, the combination of two effects signifying its status as a grade 2 rune. Most of the magic arrays would be shaved off after two uses, however, leaving behind very little power. This was the most important part and the reason for the high cost. A self-destructing magic array that had a limit on the number of uses was difficult to draw. A normal grade 2 rune would only cost two-thirds as much.

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In a tavern at the side of the city, Medium Rare, Olar, and Phaser were drinking at a table. They were mostly here because of the troll's existence: Medium Rare was unwelcome in most taverns because he would scare off the other customers.

Perhaps it was due to his soul contract with Richard, but Olar had been jittery as of late. He'd thus pulled Medium Rare away for a few drinks, and for some reason, Phaser had come along as well. However, the elf had no other thoughts for the night, eager to rinse his throat with alcohol and wash away the restlessness of his troll.

Phaser was wrapped up in a dark robe, hiding the unique features that would attract attention. Business was slow in the tavern anyway, with only two tables filled, but bottles were already strewn over theirs. Medium Rare alone had the capacity of seven or eight sturdy men, his large body not even fitting into the chair. He had to sit on the floor, bringing him to the same height as the seated Olar. The elven bard himself was used to high society where alcohol tolerance was an essential weapon, while Phaser wasn't half-bad either. The alcohol seemed to have no effect on her.

Book 2, Chapter 214

Troll's Battle(2)

The tavern boss walked out, six bottles of home-made whiskey in his hand. He almost couldn't keep up with the pace of the troll's drinking.

"This batch is from my personal collection. It has a diff'rent taste, but be careful! The thing's strong!" he politely reminded them. However, his tone made it seem like he was actually egging them on. It was obvious that these customers could drink up all his stock, earning him a great deal of money.

Medium Rare hummed an affirmative, grabbing the tray and placing it on the table. He took one of the bottles by the neck, pouring the liquid down his throat. A wood-tinted smell of fruit spread out as the alcohol flowed out, and the mellow taste was much better than anything they'd gotten before. This rich fluid was actually very strong; by the time the bottle's contents were in his stomach, even the troll felt a comforting dizziness.

The door to the tavern was pulled open, and two groups of people entered one after the other. Looking at their attire they were bounty hunters, a common profession in the Bloodstained Lands. These sorts of people did anything to earn the money for drink, be it working as bodyguards or bandits.

The first group of four managed to find a good place, leaving the three behind discontent. There were only two tables left in the tavern, and both were next to Medium Rare. Nobody dared get close to the troll, as good-natured as he seemed.

The three bounty hunters muttered something, but it was already far too late and they seemingly didn't want to find another place. They chose a table and sat down.

One of them was a little clumsy while taking his seat, sending his

coat flying to brush against the back of Medium Rare's head.

"Hey! You touched me!" Medium Rare stated roughly.

"Sorry, friend. This place is a little narrow," the hunter answered apologetically, fear in his voice. His companions looked over nervously as well, nobody daring to do something that could cause a misunderstanding. Thankfully, Medium Rare was in no mood to bicker. The matter was concluded with a wave of his hand, and Olar just glanced at the hunters without bothering about them.

The troll was starting to get tipsy, putting him in a good mood. The continuous battles had left every bit of his body filled with strength; it wouldn't be long before he could break through to level 13. His body had grown more nimble as well, a sign of an upcoming mutation. Although he hadn't mutated at level 12, it wouldn't be bad to do so at level 13. After all, only one or two out of every ten trolls could mutate in the first place.

However, he felt a slight numbness in the back of his head, as if a mosquito had stung him. He scratched at the place, cursing the savage creature. The Bloodstained Lands truly were strange, there were mosquitos here capable of piercing a troll's thick skin.

The hunters at the two tables sat down, ordering alcohol and dishes as they began to brag noisily. They mentioned their escapades and adventures, the occasional chuckles making the place more lively.

Medium Rare and Olar were chatting happily as well, "You don't know this, but Old Nasir made me and Tiramisu eat some sludge that was roots, grass, and leaves mixed together every day. It was just nasty! But Old Nasir said I'd slowly get smarter if I ate it every day. What's the point of being smart? Strength is always better for strong enemies. Tiramisu's smarter than me, by he never beat me before even with magic. Right, little Olar, did you know Old Nasir told me I could learn magic too? Ugh, but I hate staying in a single pose like a fool. Oh, of course Master is an exception! I just prefer

going directly, using my hammer to smash the enemies' heads!"

Olar snorted in response, "Didn't you and your brother like cooking then? When did you get the chance to crush skulls? Also, I'm older than you. Stop calling me little Olar!"

Medium Rare scratched his head and wondered in confusion, "I liked cooking then? Did I say that? Eh, I could. Old Nasir's food was horrible! And then... and then he died. Although his food was terrible, me and Tiramisu really liked him. We also like humans."

"The humans that turned you into a slave!" Olar stated coldly. He had once been a slave to humans' wills. His mixed blood ensured he would never have status amongst both humans and elves.

Medium Rare scratched his head, "But Master is human."

Olar nodded this time, showing his approval. Richard was actually a fairly good master, treating his subordinates very well. His future was also promising. He'd be even better if those two fierce women weren't by his side. Flowsand and Waterflower were exceptionally beautiful, but he rued the very thought of them now. In fact, he didn't think he could even get it up for them.

At that moment, Medium Rare felt the back of his head itching once more. The mosquito's venom seemed to be quite potent. Trolls had nature resistance to toxins and illness, and a mosquito able to hurt him was something he had never seen before. He reached over to scratch, but then he suddenly shouted!

There was a huge, swollen sore on the back of his head the size of a bowl! It was fine before he scratched it, but it burst apart the moment he scratched it and sprayed black blood everywhere. The pain was bone-piercing.

"What's going on?" Olar was terrified and stunned, immediately sobering up. He quickly stood up, only to see that the seven bounty hunters that had come in late were drawing weapons from their robes. A few crossbows were already aimed at him!

The hunter closest to the troll had already drawn a dull, large dagger at some point in time, aiming it to pierce the troll's back. The attack was fast and fierce, unexpectedly quiet. If not for Olar coincidentally looking that way and seeing it, he wouldn't even have noticed someone was there.

An assassin. A powerful assassin! Olar's hair practically stood on end, the chill of death already pervading his heart. The four crossbows fired simultaneously, the short, tail-less bolts whistling through the air. Three of them shone with a mysterious blue light, evidently laced with powerful toxins.

Given how close they were, Olar couldn't dodge at all. Given his physique, even with chainmail on he could not block the mass of arrows coming his way!

Medium Rare roared furiously, the bellowing noise causing everyone to see black. All the bottles of wine in the tavern exploded, fragments flying everywhere. He didn't seem to be affected by the dagger piercing his ribs, agilely getting up and placing his broad body as a barrier that protected Olar and Phaser!

Dull sounds rang out as the four poisoned bolts entered the troll's back, embedded deep into his body. They only left four small holes on the surface of his back.

Book 2, Chapter 215

Troll's Battle(3)

“Go!” Medium Rare grabbed a table and threw it behind him. His tremendous strength turned even the blunt edge of the table top into a terrifying blade.

The faces of the hunters changed. They jumped out of the way one by one, not one having the courage to receive the blow. They knew all too well how terrifying the power of an enraged troll could get.

The assassin stuck close to Medium Rare, his actions practised and skilful. Using the whirling table as a blind spot, his dagger left a frightful wound on the troll's enormous body.

The muscles around the injury squirmed non-stop, as if trying to close the wound. However, it was to no avail; a stream of blood poured out, as if a wine barrel had been smashed open against a counter. Even the troll's powerful vitality could not stem the blood flow; the dagger clearly was enchanted to enhance its cutting power.

Medium Rare turned around, howling as he threw a punch at the assassin. The nimble killer seemed to turn into a shadow as he avoided the heavy blow, once again plunging his blade into the back of the troll's knee. It left behind a wound that was at least ten centimetres deep.

The troll roared in pain. The tendons in his right leg had been broken, leaving him unable to support his body as he landed heavily on his knee. The brief exchange proved that the assassin was at least level 14, and even the others disguised as bounty hunters were level 11 or above.

Olar's face paled. For a split second, he entertained the thought of escaping alone.

This was clearly a planned assassination. Given his ability, if he stayed he would undoubtedly die. However, that hesitation was fleeting. He clenched his teeth, quickly starting a spellsong. Sadly, there were few spells he could use in this situation, and they were all weak. Neither his skills at archery nor his warsongs were useful in an indoor melee. Facing many high-level opponents, he knew that these grade 3 spells couldn't do much. Still, this was the only way he could help Medium Rare.

Phaser stood up, but she remained in a strange curled posture as she tried her best to reduce her size as a target. Her gaze was fixed on the tavern boss. He looked like any other old man to the ordinary eye, his expression one of panic, but in her vision he was lighting aflame as he prepared for battle. His internal energy was murky and thick, putting him at level 13 at minimum!

“Careful of the boss!” she shrieked urgently. Her sharp voice pierced everyone's ears like a needle, stopping them in their tracks.

Originally driven insane by the alcohol and acute pain, Medium Rare immediately sobered up. A dark silhouette flashed behind Phaser only moments after her shout, a jagged armour-breaking sword entering her back. Even her natural armour could not hold out against the sharp blade, an ear-splitting crack ringing out as the weapon pierced straight towards her heart.

Medium Rare started howling once more, his skin quickly turning red. This was a sign of him going berserk. The troll swung horizontally, sweeping his fist towards the tavern boss who was making his way towards him. The boss paled in shock; the air blown towards him was biting cold, holding overwhelming might. There wasn't enough distance to dodge; he could only erect a barrier of energy as a last-second measure before crossing his arms, doggedly trying to fend off this attack.

Cracking sounds rang out as the man's bones were shattered. He was flung away by the punch, sent flying through two walls before

crashing outside the tavern. Even though he had level 14 energy, he was only an assassin; he was bound to be injured in a direct confrontation against someone with extraordinary strength.

With that done, Medium Rare slammed into the wall. The wood collapsed like cardboard, the broken piece fished out by the troll and thrown towards the crowd of assassins. A fierce whistle rang out as the wall smashed towards their head, powder flying everywhere. Even the level 15 assassin didn't dare try and block it.

One of them was a little too slow to dodge the attack. The edge of the broken wall knocked into him, sending him flying into the distance.

On the other hand, their leader had fallen to the ground in a flash. Moving like a lizard, he made it to Medium Rare's feet in the blink of an eye. Using a dagger that was as wide as an axe, he sliced into the troll's foot and cut off two of his toes.

"ARGH!" Medium Rare howled in pain, punching the floor with his huge fist. The blow smashed a deep pit into the floor, the explosive wind coming from the outburst blowing away some of the customers who could not get away in time. The snake-like assassin was long gone, even having left another wound on the troll's elbow. This cut was too hurried to make it to the bone, but the diagonal slash exposed red and white tissue to leave blood splattering everywhere.

On the other side, Phaser's body trembled as she swept her left arm behind her. However, the assassin only smiled sadistically as the dagger in his hand pulled out and stabbed her twice more. His level was so much higher than her's that her actions were extremely slow in his eyes. There were numerous flaws in her defence, and even after the two extra stabs he could calmly stretch out his left hand to grip her attacking hand's wrist.

This exchange was enough for him to learn of her strength. His hand was like a steel vice, and he had full confidence that it would

shatter her wrist.

And indeed, her left hand fell into his, but he didn't feel like he had grabbed a wrist at all. He could feel a blade's edge within, and given how much force he had exerted that one grip stung his palm hard enough to reach the bone.

The assassin felt enraged at losing to this hidden weapon, immediately drawing his sword to stab Phaser's heart again. However, a strong wind blew in his face as a huge fist entered his sight! He hadn't thought that the troll, injured as he was by his comrades, would choose him as the target. Only able to use his arms to block, he was sent flying by Medium Rare.

"Go! Quickly!" The troll scooped Phaser up, tossing her out through the hole in the wall. He then reached out and grabbed Olar, throwing the bard away as well. His actions were violent and sudden, interrupting Olar's spellcasting.

"You're more important to Master. Go quickly! I'll stop them!" Medium Rare yelled, using his huge body to plug the hole in the tavern's wall.

The face of the assassin leader fell. He waved his dagger and charged forth like a shadow in the wind, every flash leaving deep wounds in the troll's head. Rare's heavy fists did not hit him at all. The troll was covered in wounds that severely slowed him down, only relying on instinct to throw punches just to buy time. How could such random attacks hit a level 15 assassin?

However, the leader's expression only turned colder. His dagger flashed faster and faster, basically splitting Medium Rare apart until there was no more blood to spill, but the troll remained standing as he threw punches that were each stronger than the last. A momentary slip up could spell lethal danger. Trolls were indeed tenacious, but this was unheard of. The most wretched thing was that the thing had sent away its weaker companions! Was this not just cruel stupidity?

Outside the pub, Olar and Phaser had fallen to the ground. The bard turned over and got up; there were no thoughts in his mind outside of saving Medium Rare. His vision red, he stared at the tavern and started dashing towards the troll who looked like he was made of blood. However, his feet were suddenly pulled back and he fell again.

“Escape.” Phaser only said this one word, her tone inhuman. She then paid no more attention to him, jumping up from her spot and rushing off into the dark night. She shrugged off her robe, exposing her body completely as she melded into the darkness in a few steps.

Being sent to the cold ground calmed Olar down. He finally understood clearly that rushing back would not save Rare’s life; it would only add to their own casualties.

Medium Rare was originally the most likely one to escape. An enraged level 12 troll was someone perhaps only a saint could stop without getting hurt. However, he still chose to let the weaker Olar and Phaser escape. In his simple mind, he only knew that they were more important to Richard.

He raised his head to look in their direction one last time. The troll’s large body was like a firm mountain, blocking the hole in the wall. Blood, flesh, even his organs constantly spilt out from his sides, but his humongous body stayed still to the end.

Olar turned around and flew out, not daring to look back even if the pain in his chest screamed for him to take it out on someone. He was scared of attracting the attention of the assassins; they had already managed to get to the small window in the kitchen and jumped out to attack.

His steps felt far heavier than usual. He knew that he now carried the weight of the troll’s original responsibilities on his shoulders.

Book 2, Chapter 216

No Need For Anger

Back at the inn, Richard had just finished the last stroke of his rune. He suddenly raised his head, looking out the window. Only a moment ago, he had felt an intense throb in the bottom of his heart. A strong warning was blaring out from Medium Rare.

“Something happened?”

The slave contract only allowed him to know his slaves' approximate location. If they were too far apart, his party could only send vague emotions over. He had an intense feeling of danger, but couldn't tell what exactly had happened to Medium Rare. On top of that, he had only sensed a fighting will as well as a warning. There was no sign of any request for help.

He immediately sealed the rune he had just crafted, changing into robes that were equipped with a defensive spell formation. He then took out a sealed box, removing an assortment of scrolls and placing them in the pocket.

A loud shout woke Flowsand up, getting her to prepare for battle as quickly as possible. He also stirred everyone connected to his soul, ordering them to get ready for a fight.

He was now certain that something had gone wrong. More fuzzy warnings were coming from Olar and Phaser. However, the two were too weak; given the distance, the information transmitted was a lot fainter than what came from Rare.

Richard went about his preparations like this was any other war, finishing up within a single minute. He then made his way downstairs to the inn's ground floor.

The entire inn was bustling. Richard's personal guard had rushed out from their rooms, throwers flooding out from the basement. Humongous bats flew out of the attic, hovering high in the night

sky. They used their powerful hearing and the sharp vision that came from being the broodmother's drones, scouring the entire city for any suspicious activity.

In the army camp nearby, Tiramisu abruptly woke up from his dreams. His head was splitting with pain, and he howled as he cradled it in his arms.

Thunderous roars rang out as Gangdor drove the sleeping soldiers out of their tents, grabbing their weapons and armour before gathering at the plaza to await orders.

Hundreds of desert warriors rushed into the stables. The leaders and elites were all veterans who had followed Richard through more than a dozen major battles, making them both loyal and powerful. These valiant soldiers only needed a falchion and a horse to become elite cavalrymen.

The cavalry had gathered up by the three-minute mark. Gangdor led them in a charge towards the inn; the infantry would be taken care of by the two novice knights.

Within a few minutes, Richard's troops had been mobilised. The elites were already in formation, able to enter battle at any time. However, this information did not overwhelm him; his gift of wisdom was being used to the fullest. Although the information coming from the trio of Olar, Medium Rare, and Phaser was growing more ominous as time went by, he still maintained absolute calm. This was a part of his fundamentals as a mage of the Deepblue.

Just as he walked past a row of windows in the corridor leading downstairs, Richard suddenly grew alert. He dropped to the ground without thinking, instantly casting a range barrier.

A light buzz sounded out, the magical shield flickering out of existence. It had been shattered practically the moment it appeared, a long silver arrow soundlessly flitting through Richard's original position. The arrow then plunged into the

darkness, flying off towards the unknown.

Richard leapt up. This was another brush with death, but he was no longer afraid. In fact, there were no fluctuations in his emotions as he stood in front of the window, looking outside.

It was already late into the night, everything shrouded in pitch-black darkness. Richard couldn't see the archer with his naked eye, only knowing that someone in the depths of the darkness was definitely watching him. He merely stood in front of the window, natural and calm as he looked at the unknown opponent. There was no provocation or wrath, instead an inexplicable calmness that made it seem like nothing had happened just then.

Standing in front of the window made Richard a good target once more. However, there was no second arrow shooting towards him. He certainly wouldn't continue to wait, merely standing in front of the window for a while before turning to head downstairs. He then took command of his personal guard and the throwers.

A slender figure was stood atop a wooden building a few hundred metres away. A longbow that was even larger than his body was put down, before he shook his head and turned to fly to the outskirts of the city.

Richard finally felt an intense fluctuation in his consciousness, coming from the node that belonged to Olar. It was clear that the elf was much closer now, but he didn't rush towards the inn. As a bard, he quickly made his way to the barracks so he could join the troops. His abilities could only be used to their fullest when amidst an army.

On the other hand, Phaser had crossed half the city at an extraordinary speed to return to his side. She was injured as well, but the damage was not fatal. The assassin had assumed she was human and attacked accordingly, but her internal structure was completely different. This was another of the broodmother's deceptions.

Stood at the inn's plaza, Richard watched the strong barbarians and throwers gather together. The troops were almost ready in the time it had taken him to walk here from his room. However, just as he was about to issue orders Richard's face suddenly fell. The node belonging to Medium Rare had dimmed completely, disappearing to his mind's eye.

Still, he only stopped for a moment before he mounted his horse. He then led his troops on a charge towards the tavern the troll had been attacked in. Everyone who hadn't slept yet was left stunned, none having the guts to stand in their way.

At that moment, a majestic aura rose up from a corner of the city. "Who dares wreak havoc in Bluewater?" a dignified voice resounded throughout the city.

This was the aura of a powerhouse. The Sword Saint Rolf had already risen into the sky, energy swirling around his longsword to emit a bright radiance that was extremely striking in the night. All of the starlight in the sky seemed dim in comparison.

However, more than ten black shadows had already left the city by this time, quickly escaping into the depths of the Bloodstained Lands. A few of them were the assassins who had disguised themselves as bounty hunters in the tavern, the level 15 assassin among them as well.

One of them suddenly raised his head, speaking to the level 15 assassin, "Sir, something's wrong. That bat in the sky has been following us ever since we left the city!"

"Don't bother. Someone will take care of it," the assassin replied calmly.

A long arrow flew out from nowhere, nailing the bat's body like a lightning bolt. The creature struggled for a little while after the arrow penetrated its body, but it wasn't long before it suddenly burst into a cloud of bloody mist!

Book 2, Chapter 217

Brothers

Far away, Richard suddenly squinted. Tears streamed out from his eyes as though they were stung by smoke, but a quick wipe from his handkerchief took care of that. The broodmother's elites used their own power to sustain their connection with him, so even if they were eliminated it would only cause a little irritation at most.

However, this was the first time one of his elite bats had been exterminated. It reminded Richard of the archer that had ambushed him at the inn. That fellow's archery was extremely impressive, far surpassing Olar. His range had to be over 800 metres, making him a nemesis of mages. However, most long-range enchanted arrows used the power of nature to track their targets. His elven bloodline ensured he was extremely sensitive to them.

A plot for a serial assassination had been put into action that night. The actual killing began with a remote strike ambushing his subordinates, and when he received this news he was expected to look his calm. Hurrying into the open, he would then be killed himself. However, his calm vigilance and quick mobilisation of the troops had been unexpectedly immaculate. In addition to that, Richard himself had an extraordinary perception that allowed him to sense the threat and avoid the fatal blow.

Rolf was neither too early nor too late. However, Richard knew that it would be far too difficult for him to catch up to the assassins. And even if he did manage to chase up to them, even a saint would have no choice but to flee in the face of a level 15 assassin, level 14 archer, and more than ten level 11 killers. If the opponents deployed themselves properly, even escape would be impossible. The difference between level 15 and level 16 wasn't too apparent: it was level 18 where most mages and other powerhouses

received new, powerful skills.

Richard had already memorised their general characteristics. Although they were experts at disguise, there were numerous secret spells in the Deepblue that were beyond their comprehension. Once he was of a higher level, there would surely be a way to catch them.

A moment later, Richard was already standing at the small tavern where the bloody battle had taken place. All of his followers were staring at the gory battlefield in silence.

Medium Rare was collapsed on the ground, still in the midst of an attack. His enormous body was riddled with countless injuries, all his organs bled out. The troll's left forearm was only left with a tiny patch of skin, all on the upper side. Two other corpses were left behind in the tavern, the chest of one completely caved in. Judging by his posture, the troll had likely rammed his head into the man's body and sent him flying. The ruptured ribs had pierced through his heart and lungs, making the injury fatal.

The troll was collapsed in the opening in the wall. The assassins would have had to walk over his corpse to walk through.

Richard stood unmoving before the dead body. Heavy footsteps sounded behind him, as Rolf's deep and mellow voice rang out, "A subordinate of yours?"

"A follower," Richard corrected.

The difference between the two words was minute, but it was extremely important to Richard. Subordinates were often temporary, but followers would be companions for a long time. They were like brothers and comrades in arms.

Rolf shrugged in response, "Merely a troll. But he really was formidable, what a pity."

"His name is Medium Rare," Richard insisted. It expressed his stance tactfully, but still showed his resolution.

“Medium Rare... A strange name.” Rolf understood Richard’s meaning, but he merely smiled in response. He just thought it was another eccentricity of the noble mage, ignoring it as he started to inspect the traces of the battle. The more he looked around, the graver his expression became. The bloody scene during the battle was reconstructed in his mind.

For his part, Richard had been informed about the battle by Olar. A single sweeping glance allowed him to see every detail by heart. He didn’t need to know how exactly it had happened; the killer’s name was enough.

Rolf checked the troll’s injuries once more before commenting, “This looks like the work of Blackwing... Oh! This Medium Well could actually keep up with Blackwing’s subordinates for so long!”

“Blackwing?” Richard focused on the name.

“Mm. He’s the most fearful fellow in Red Cossack, even harder to deal with than their two saints. Although he’s only level 15, even I would have to be extremely careful if he decided to target me. Blackwing is a fiend of the shadows, a cockroach who can survive in the filthiest of places. Besides, he isn’t alone. He has nearly twenty assassins over level 10 under him to dispatch as he pleases. Those two over there are his subordinates.”

Richard nodded, repeating, “His name is Medium Rare.”

“Alright then, Medium Rare...” Rolf replied a little grudgingly. Already finished inspecting the battlefield, he was secretly astonished. This troll had actually stalled Blackwing and his subordinates for so long. His body had sustained more than a hundred blows! It was completely unfathomable.

Blackwing was infamous for his vicious dagger techniques. The wounds he left behind weren’t only meant to disable. Every slash at muscle and bone brought along the most intense of suffering. If one continued fighting after receiving a wound from him, there was a high chance that they would rip the wound apart. Medium

Rare's own left arm was mostly ripped apart during the intense battle. What sort of resilience did it take to endure such suffering?

However, Rolf did not ponder about this any further. He just chalked it up to the troll's superhuman physique and vitality.

"How do you want to handle his corpse?" Richard asked Tiramisu, who had been silent all this while. Only after Richard's question did Rare's brother speak in a low voice, "Hand it to me, we have an ancient tradition in our tribe."

"Alright," Richard nodded at once.

Rolf turned around, casting a profound glance at Tiramisu, but the troll did not even notice the gaze. The entirety of his focus was on his brother.

The troll suddenly reached out to Gangdor, "Lend me your axe."

Gangdor silently handed his weapon over. Even as everyone thought Tiramisu wanted to hack the assassins' corpses apart to vent, the mage walked over to his own brother's corpse. He looked over his brother's tragic state, unperturbed as he raised his axe and cut the head off in a single forceful blow!

Some of the human soldiers cried out in alarm. Many of Richard's followers also changed expressions, unable to understand what the troll was thinking.

He raised his brother's head in his hand, speaking in a low voice, "As long as I eat brother's brain, his soul will settle down in my body. I will use his skull as a necklace, always carrying it with me. This way, whenever I behead our enemies he will see it too."

This was a strange tradition, one that made the atmosphere suffocating.

Richard pointed to the headless corpse, asking, "What about the rest of him?"

"He can be handled in any way. In our tribe, the dead would

become a meal. Otherwise, they would be deserted in the wild to feed the wild beasts. It was a way of giving back to nature,” the mage explained.

Richard nodded, “Then we can send him off with magic fire.”

He stimulated his Archeron bloodline, extracting blazing energy and mixing it with his mana. A crimson wisp flew out with a wave of his hand, landing on the corpse with a dull boom before beginning to burn violently.

This spell was a variant of Hand of Flames, not considered a proper form of magic at all. However, the addition of the power from the Archeron bloodline turned it into a blaze.

He pointed to the two other corpses, “Zendrall, I leave these to you. They shouldn’t be liberated in death.”

“No problem. If I use them carefully, I can keep them for a very long time.” The necromancer’s voice was low and hoarse, carrying a hint of the sinister and stifling feeling of a graveyard.

Rolf’s countenance changed slightly, his gaze at Richard growing somewhat different. The mage was just far too young and handsome, giving people the impression that he depended on his family background to achieve success. It caused one to overlook the feats he had achieved. Richard’s military successes were all glorious and splendid; even though he wasn’t a veteran of many kinds of battles yet most high-ranking generals could not beat him in a melee. That was all the more true for an individual powerhouse like himself.

The Sword Saint hadn’t paid much regard to this overly handsome noble in the past. Although Richard’s mentor could provide items he was unable to reject, this did not improve his impression of Richard himself. He hadn’t lived too long yet, but he had already seen many geniuses who rose like comets but fell in a short time. It was this cruelty that caused him to reevaluate the youth. Still, he did not think the level 11 mage could pose any

threat to himself. A few more years, perhaps.

There was an ancient saying in Faelor: ‘Level is very important, but it is not everything.’

When people drew from the wisdom of ancient times, they emphasised the parts that they related to and valued. Those at higher levels would focus on the first half of this saying, while those who were weaker would focus on the second.

Soon after, the tavern was swallowed by the raging flames. The two assassins’ corpses were carried towards Richard’s camp, with Rolf and Richard moving together on horseback. The Sword Saint was escorting him back to the inn, to prevent any further mishaps on the way. A huge part of the swordsman’s profit was bound to the young great mage, and frail mages were always key targets for protection.

Along the way, Richard described the general course of Medium Rare’s battle to the death. The Sword Saint imagined the gruesome battle in his head, sighing involuntarily and speaking in a rueful tone, “I truly did not expect a troll to sacrifice himself to protect his comrades. That is simply unlike... his kind.” He had wanted to describe the troll as brutal and foolish, but had thought better of it in the last minute and stiffly forced the words back down his throat.

Richard seemed not to catch the implications in Rolf’s words, replying calmly, “Every troll is different. It’s just that most people never cared to understand them, thinking there was only one type of troll in the world.”

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Brothers(2)

It was rather late into the night when they returned to the inn, but Richard wasn't feeling sleepy at all. He rearranged all the magic alarms and traps in their surroundings.

Assassins were the nemeses of mages, but there were still a handful of ways to deal with them. High-level alarms and traps would render most of their kind helpless, and many spells could lock onto and track one's soul. Any assassin that was caught by a mage wouldn't have long to survive.

This was all the more true in Faelor, where the standard of magic was much weaker than in Norland. The abilities Richard had gained from the Deepblue would ensure that even an antimage would find it hard to break in, forget a regular assassin. Only a level 14 mage could remove Richard's alarms, but mages couldn't hide their aura like assassins. It would be near impossible for them to get past Waterflower's sensitive nose.

Once he was finished with the defences, Richard took out the rune that he had just crafted and walked towards the barracks. A bright bonfire was lit in the middle of the peaceful camp, most of the tents rolled down without much movement outside of the nightly patrol.

The only place that still had some semblance of activity was near the fire. Tiramisu and Gangdor were sitting together, drowning out their sorrows in alcohol. Next to them was a pile of empty barrels, and two that were still unopened. It was obvious that it wasn't enough.

An iron pot was perched over the bonfire, with the troll's signature soup boiling within. However, it seemed like Tiramisu was the only one interested in food as he had a plate before him. The only things in front of Gangdor were jars of alcohol.

Richard walked over and sat down, passing the box over to Tiramisu, “This is a rune I made for Medium Rare, a standard elementary strength. None of us could have guessed that it would never be put to use.”

Tiramisu was stunned, unable to receive the case from Richard, “Master... We are... trolls. Can we even use runes?”

“All living beings can use runes,” Richard replied.

Tiramisu still did not take the magically sealed box, scratching his head out of habit as he asked, “I never heard of a troll that could use runes. This is expensive stuff, you can get many barrels of wine with it.”

“A standard elementary strength rune is worth about 100,000 gold in Norland,” Richard answered indifferently. What he didn’t mention was that his own runes were usually worth much more than market price. The one he had made for Medium Rare would go for at least 150,000 coins due to a greater boost.

“100,000 gold... Even quality ale costs 10 gold a barrel, I can actually get 10,000 barrels with this! If I exchange half of it for cows, I can get 3,000! If I spend carefully, I’d be set for the rest of my life!” Tiramisu quickly calculated the value of the runes in his own terms. Trolls were actually smart creatures, and their mages were used to numbers as well.

“Indeed.” Richard pushed the case towards him.

The troll shook his head profusely, eyeing the thing rather weirdly as if it was a bunch of delicious meat and wine instead of a box, “Medium Rare can’t use it anymore. Give it to someone else, Master, don’t waste it.”

“This belongs to your brother, no one else.” Richard fixed his gaze upon the bonfire, sighing, “The two of you have been by my side for a long time now, but I haven’t been able to give you anything. Consider this a memento for Rare’s sake. If you want

you can bury it with your brother like humans do, as a companion.”

“Brother doesn’t need to be buried, he’ll be together with me very soon,” Tiramisu pointed to the pot of boiling soup. Only then did Richard notice something floating in the middle. Although it was only a third of its original size, this was undoubtedly Medium Rare’s head. Indeed, then. With the body already burnt to ashes by magical flames, there was nothing left to bury.

Tiramisu took the pot down, ignoring the scalding heat as he held up the head and gnawed at it. Every movement was solemn and serious like in a devout ritual, the troll himself seeming rather divine.

Richard and Gangdor watched in silence.

Moments later, the only thing left of Medium Rare was his skull. His brother had not let go of any flesh at all. It seemed like the soup was cooked using a secret method, because the skull both shrank down and gained a jade-like turquoise sheen that was completely different from a regular skull.

Soon after, the troll emptied all the contents of the pot before sticking his tongue in and licking every nook and cranny clean. It was only then that he threw it aside, patting his belly loudly, “Ah, I can feel brother settling down nicely.”

He then took out an iron chain that he had prepared earlier on, threading it through the skull and hanging it on his neck. “Now he’ll be able to watch me avenge him.”

Richard looked over the mage from head to toe, “Well, use the rune for yourself then. It could be a companion that way too.”

Tiramisu didn’t think much of that, merely laughing happily. In his heart, this rune truly was a fitting companion for his brother.

The process of attaching the rune was quite simple. The troll had both the slot and the capacity, so within a few minutes Richard

had fixed it onto his chest. This way, Medium Rare's skull could rest directly upon it. As for the extent of the strength boost, none present looked into it.

Troll mages were different from the mages of other races. Their ability at magic was weaker in comparison, but they were extremely strong and had tough physiques. Even as the smartest of trolls, they did not forget about their primal battle instincts. As long as a hammer was brought into the picture, Tiramisu would become a dreadful killing machine.

The three then sat around the bonfire, all drinking in silence. The two barrels of wine were emptied very quickly, but none of them were tipsy in the slightest. Their faces were all serious as they focused on the jumping sparks. No conversation was made; they all seemed to be thinking about something.

The wine was soon gone. Gangdor tipped the last barrel upside down, but only a pathetic few drops fell out and he tossed it aside begrudgingly. He thoughtlessly grabbed his huge axe, wiping it as he asked, "Master, don't you hate Red Cossack?"

Richard flashed a smile typical of nobility, shaking his head as he replied gently, "Hate? No, I don't. There's no need to hate the dead."

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